

西尾維新

Illustration
西村キヌ

新本格魔法少女



講談社
文庫

Episode One: Easy Magic Cannot Be Used.

I happened to witness what might have been an incident, or might have been an accident, but either way was clearly a truth, exactly one week ago, Sunday last week. Events had brought me far from my place of residence in the city of Kawano, in Saga Prefecture, taking me across prefectural lines into Fukuoka Prefecture, the city of Hakata, the town of Kizuna. There are a number of ways in which I could describe the business that brought me there, but they all boil down to “meeting someone,” and looked at from a different perspective, you could even claim I had come with no clear purpose at all. Either way it was not inevitable that I should arrive at the spot where I witnessed this truth; I believe my being there was pure coincidence. Because of things like this, I cannot bring myself to hate coincidence. Events occurred while I was standing on subway platform number 1 in the New Kizuna Station, waiting for the train that would take me back into Hakata proper. The time was definitely 6:32 p.m. I can say so with confidence because that was the moment at which the train I had intended to board was pulling into the station. All Japanese trains, private or government-operated, are invariably punctual. Which means it was 6:32. The customary announcement, “Train approaching platform 1. Please remain behind the yellow lines,” echoed through the station, and it happened a few seconds later. Four people lined up in front of me, preparing to board the train. I did not know any of them, but I know their names now: Kagawa Sakiro, Yana Harusame, Manabe Saki, and Tainaka Umi. With perfect timing, just as the front of the train was about to pass us, they all flung themselves out in front of it. I remember that moment happening in slow motion—whether the result of chemicals in my brain or simply a trick of the mind. I saw them seemingly sucked toward it, struggling against one another to be the first to fall. I saw the train’s driver gaping as if he were witnessing the destruction of earth and heaven—but only for an instant, a mere instant.

A moment later, the speed of my vision returned to normal—and what happened afterward need not be explained to anyone, assuming blood still flows to their brain. They were pulped, their bits flung together till it was impossible to tell which belonged to which. Trains have been designed for the simple function of moving quickly along tracks, and what might occur if they happened to strike a human being has never really been on their designers’ minds. The four victims and I were lined up near the front end of the platform, but it made little difference. We were facing a massive chunk of iron, a veritable symbol of destructive force. Even if we had been at the far end of the platform, near the front doors of the train, the best they could have hoped for was that their bodies might have remained recognizably human. At present, this is the extent of the truth as I know it; and if that is all there is to it, then

I do not see a problem. Certainly, because of this truth the train was delayed a wasteful thirty minutes, but I am not so petty as to be infuriated by such trivialities. Anger is a waste of energy, and I make use of it only if there is something to be gained in the process. But there were a number of factors to this truth that suggest it would not remain a simple truth, and I viewed this as problematic. The first problem is an obvious one—the fact that four people chose to jump simultaneously. If one person had chosen to dive in front of a train, I would understand. If a single person had tripped and fallen onto the tracks, that would have been even easier. Suicide or accident, such incidents have become a ceaseless ritual, occurring constantly in all parts of the country, on every day of the year. But for four people to engage in that ritual together—that was different. It was unthinkable that they had chosen to do so together by chance, coincidentally—and the idea of it being a planned suicide was also dubious. If they had been family members or close friends, group suicide might have been an option, but from what I had observed standing behind them, there was no connection among the four: Each of them was a complete stranger to the other three.

I am rather confident of my ability to observe human behavior. (Bring anyone you like to me, and no matter who they are, I will provide you with an itemized list of a hundred facts about them—obviously, not including any details of their appearance, just facts about their inner nature.) And the newspapers after the incident verified that there was no connection among them, so that can now be put down as an objective fact. In other words, if the first problem was the simultaneous nature of it, the second was the lack of connection among them. I doubt there are many so foolish as to have not worked out the third problem—namely, that it was absolutely impossible. For four strangers to fall onto the tracks simultaneously—to make that situation occur, the only reasonable method would be for the person standing immediately behind them to push them off the platform. Indeed, the police and the news media are actively looking for the “culprit” behind this “case”—sadly, a futile effort. For the simple reason that the person standing behind the four victims was me; and I had not pushed them. I would never do anything like push four complete strangers onto the train tracks, never do anything that failed to provide some future benefit. But no matter what I say, without your even needing to bring up the Cretan paradox, mere words on my part are hardly convincing. More convincing than any exhortation on my part is the simple fact that it was physically impossible for me to have pushed the four of them off the platform. I might have been able to push one, assuming that one was a frail woman ... but I, Kugi Kizutaka, was, at the time, four feet five inches tall, weighed seventy-three pounds, and was ten years old. I had no means at my disposal capable of forcibly moving four adults at once. Regardless of that, if I had stuck around, I would undoubtedly have been suspected, but I took advantage of my size to slip away during the commotion. So. Yes. The fact that it was impossible for me to have been the culprit in their deaths led to one conclusion: It was impossible. Absolutely impossible. The

sum total of these three problems—simultaneousness, lack of connection, and impossibility—made it clear that this problem was a problem for me.

As I said before, I went to Fukuoka for no better reason than to meet someone, so my encounter with this truth could be viewed as an unexpected accident, but as far as I was concerned, an accident like this was something to be met with open arms. I will happily state once more that I cannot bring myself to dislike coincidence. My first thought was to go to see Risuka directly, that very evening, but since the deaths of four people would lead to a rather thorough police investigation, I decided to allow a week for things to settle down and spent the time dealing with other matters. If the situation resolved itself in some insipid fashion in that time, then I hardly need dirty my hands with it. But these thoughts were nothing more than a pretense; inwardly I was convinced. Conviction is a very modest way of describing it for someone with my personality, but in truth, a conviction is what it was. I was convinced that the four I had seen sucked toward the tracks had not been victims ... but sacrifices.

“Hey, Risuka. I came to love you.”

She did not respond.

“I mean, came to see you.”

I had not expected Risuka to demonstrate any high-level interactive abilities such as a proper comeback, but the fact that she failed to show any reaction at all was in itself a rather dejecting moment, and one that left me awkwardly explaining my own bad joke. I picked up a cushion (bat-shaped) lying in the corner and sat down on it without bothering to get permission. Risuka was sitting at her desk, her right hand moving steadily. Writing something. I stood up again and stood behind her, peering over her shoulder at the desk. A thick hardcover book lay open on her left and a college-ruled notebook on her right. They call it “college-ruled,” but actual college students almost never use them. She appeared to be copying everything from her left to her right.

Which meant the book on her left must be one she had recently acquired or had borrowed from some secret library— a book of magic. Risuka believed that copying grimoires was both fun and productive. The shelf to one side was packed with books on all kinds of magic, the only notable feature of her otherwise rather drab room. *De vermisiis mysteriis*, *Liberdamnatus*, *Cultes des goules*, *De masticatione mortuorum in tumulis*, *Celaeno Fragments*, *Turba philosophorum*, *Kryptographik*, *The Book of Thoth*, *Malleus maleficarum*, *Dhol Chants*, *Image du monde*, *Necronomicon* — she had all the major works (although most of them were handwritten copies). The only way she could get her hands on rare books was to copy them out herself. In that sense, what Risuka was doing was actually collecting the contents of

grimoires, and copying them out was simply a means to that end. Collecting the originals would be quite expensive and take up a lot of space, so this was more practical, and the fact that she was writing them out all translated into Japanese was, apparently, perfectly normal for anyone from the Kingdom of Magic.

“So ... Yikes! You scared me.”

Risuka had suddenly turned toward me and screamed.

“I was much more scared! Eh? Why suddenly is Kizutaka here?”

“Well, unlike you, I can’t actually use any magic, you see. So I went through the door of the coffee shop downstairs, ignoring the Closed sign on the door; said hello to Chamberlain, who was cleaning; had him open the door behind the counter; climbed up the stairs; walked down the hall; knocked politely on your door; knocked again when you didn’t answer; and when you still didn’t answer, I opened the door and came inside.”

“Heh ... How exhaustingly orderly of you,” she said, nodding, as if impressed. “Welcome. Anywhere is fine to sit. Would you like something to drink?”

“Nah, I’m not that thirsty. It isn’t that hot yet. And that can be a dangerous question, coming from a girl who lives in a coffee shop.”

“I would not try to take money from a child.”

“What are you copying?”

“Mm? Oh, the title ... I do not know. I am investigating presently. Rarity is its one merit; it is not a book of much importance.”

“Hunh ... Always looks like such a lot of work. If you could figure out a way to make your magic work with a copier instead of doing it by hand, you’d save a lot of effort.”

“I would not do so, even if I could,” Risuka said crisply. “The fun of this is in the copying itself.”

“The process itself provides enjoyment? That is a handy system. Ideal.”

“Is not the same for Kizutaka?”

“Mm?”

“Enjoyment comes with process?” she asked, assured.

I shook my head. “Not for me. The process is never more than a means to an end,” I said. The process was never more than a means to an end. I had rarely spoken truer words.

I discovered the existence of Mizukura Risuka last April, immediately after entering the fourth grade. To be strictly accurate, I had heard a year before about a transfer student in the class next door who refused to come to school, and I knew that this student was named Mizukura Risuka. I had naturally paid sufficient attention to events in other classes. But I did not discover the true nature of the existence known as Mizukura Risuka, did not discover that she was a witch from the Kingdom of Magic beyond the Gate, until our classes were changed and Risuka’s name ended up on the same attendance sheet as mine.

Of course, whether she was in my class or not, she refused to come to school at all, and I did not know what she looked like. I could probably have found out if I had poked around, but when she was in the other class, I had not seen the point. But once she was in my class, and I was elected class representative for the fourth straight year and the seventh straight term, I did have a reason to make contact with her. In my capacity as class representative, I went to see a problem child. It made no difference to me if this Mizukura came to school or not, but if I were able to persuade her to attend school again all on my own, general opinion of me among the teachers and around the school would surely improve dramatically. As with all things, those without the capacity to evaluate accurately must be shown the light. I had no use for the adulation of those around me, but it did serve my purpose to demonstrate as clearly as possible to the simpleminded that Kugi was the sort who got things done. For the moment, if they believed me to be useful and proceeded to use me, that was sufficient. In the course of being used, I would inevitably encounter all kinds of incidents, accidents, truths, and people. Obviously, most of this would be of no use to me whatsoever, incidents and accidents and truths and people of no value worth mentioning. But occasionally, very occasionally, I would encounter incidents and accidents and truths and, yes, people that would be useful to me in times to come. Therefore, I played the role of good student. I did not need to work very hard at appealing to my classmates; it was the teachers, the adults, who mattered. Both groups were leading purposeless, meandering, wasted lives, but adults could act on a far larger scale than children, and I was grudgingly appreciative of the amount of information they had available to them. Judging from the lessons they taught, they were not terribly intelligent, but the sheer amount of time they had been alive had not gone entirely to waste. Of course, the information provided by my classmates could not be entirely dismissed, but this was simply a matter of percentages. All were wasting the

bulk of their time, but my classmates had simply lived less and must therefore rank lower when it came time to prioritize.

However, given the nature of group education, it would hardly do to be isolated from my class, so no matter how useless and forgettable a human they appeared to be, I allowed them to engage my attention. So much energy expended on sucking up to morons. Ideally, it should be possible to extract some benefit from even the most average, pathetic excuse for a human (everyone you meet is your teacher, yada yada), but it seemed I had not yet reached that level of skill, and a great deal of my time at school was spent sowing seeds that would never be harvested. Being forced to lower myself to the level of those cretins bordered on insulting. No, it was insulting. In that sense, I was not playing the role of a good student; I literally was better than all of them. This year I had become class representative for the fifth straight year and the ninth straight term... for a reason. But my inner self and their perception of me did not overlap. At any rate, I first went to Risuka's house for no other reason than to earn myself some extra points. It was a two-story building, a coffee shop with a design rather like a windmill. An elderly gentleman stood behind the counter (I would later learn that he was Chamberlain, Risuka's manservant), and he led me to her room. I opened the door and laid eyes on Risuka for the first time. She was sitting at her desk, copying a grimoire.

(...Ah.)

Red hair—and red eyes. Red kneesocks, red dress. There was a thin belt around her waist, with a holster attached; the holster was long and thin, built to hold a utility knife. She was indoors but wore red gloves, and there was a pair of cold metallic handcuffs on her right wrist, the one thing on her that was not red. Both cuffs were on the same wrist, and it functioned as a very strange bracelet. When Risuka turned toward me, the cuffs clanked together.

(Ah, ah, ah—)

The moment I laid eyes on her, I instantly abandoned all the plans I had to get the problem child to attend school again. All reasons I had to gain some insignificant amount of adulation had Vanished in the blink of an eye. I had known the moment I laid eyes on her: Mizukura Risuka was no average human, she was a full-fledged, powerful witch. I had been developing my eyes my entire life, observing everyone from newborn babies to octogenarians, honing my observational skills to the point where they could instantly tell that Mizukura Risuka was not just anyone. The moment Chamberlain left the room, I looked Risuka right in the eye. True sincerity means looking directly at your opponent, no matter the situation. Risuka admitted the truth with a speed that took even me by surprise. Not only admitted it but explained that she had been born in Nagasaki Prefecture, the

Kingdom of Magic, and not only that, but she was from Moriyashiki, a city of magic with a reputation every bit as impressive as the kingdom's capital.

"You just met me.... Should you really be telling me all that?"

"Is fine. I was never trying to hide. And if Kizutaka needs eliminating, I have magic. It will do."

"Eliminating?"

"Exterminating," she said calmly, and pulled the utility knife out of her holster, running the thin blade in and out, in and out.

Schk schk schk schk schk schk schk schk schk schk schk schk.

I was even more sure of it now. This ... this girl, out of the vast numbers of people I had met, out of all creation, from the lowest riffraff to the strangest spirits, she outranked them all—the most useful pawn there was.

★★★

My relationship with Risuka has continued to the present day. When we advanced to the fifth grade, we once again found ourselves in different classes, but since Risuka never came to school in the first place, that made no difference. Our time together was always outside the school and involved my heading to the coffee shop in my free time to talk to Risuka—usually. Risuka was often not at home. Not coming to school hardly left her a shut-in; she had moved to Saga with a clear purpose in mind, and when she was not copying grimoires, she was busy with that. She had enrolled in an elementary school for no other reason than that she was legally required to do so but did not attend classes on the grounds that she did not need them. Direct and clear. I have nothing against the direct and clear. On the pretext of helping with Risuka's goals—obviously, as far as the school was concerned, I was still doing my level best to open the heart of a problematic truant—I began regularly visiting her. Risuka accepted me, without any signs of reluctance. I would imagine she figured a guide to the unfamiliar outside world, a human ally, might come in handy. In other words, she viewed me as an effective pawn. My effectiveness is not simply my conceit; in actual fact, her effectiveness in pursuit of her goal was far greater the year after she met me than it had been the year before she met me. To Risuka, I was a useful human—a useful cooperator. I, however, was not deranged enough to help out a witch on a volunteer basis. I wanted that witch, Mizukura Risuka, as a pawn of my own. We were both each other's pawns, a system found in all walks of life, all across the world, and which I had no objections to. A perfect

confluence of interest. The only problem was which of us was actually right. This was not as simple a problem as it might appear. When I first met Risuka, I instantly knew she would be a useful pawn, but I was half wrong.

Risuka was a witch, as I thought, and one with a very impressive resume: As young as she was, she already had a Second Grade Magic Technician's license. However, her particular field of magic was not one that held much meaning for me. Not only was it meaningless, but it was a little bit beyond me. So much beyond me that I could not figure out what to do about it. Mizukura Risuka was a pawn that I was not yet able to handle properly. But I was not about to give her up for such a defeatist reason. She was the first witch I had ever met. Between Saga and Nagasaki was the Gate, which pierced the heavens... and you could legally pass through it whenever you liked, with the proper papers, but witches and wizards were generally very standoffish and rarely came to our side of the Gate. Even if they did, they would normally hide their identity—just as Risuka had disguised the fact that she was from Nagasaki when she enrolled in school. As a result of this, it was virtually impossible for an ordinary, powerless human to meet a witch. It seemed unlikely I would ever be as fortunate as I had been when I guessed that Risuka was a witch. (I might be a skilled observer, but objectively speaking, our meeting had been pure luck.) Risuka was far too valuable a pawn to abandon simply because I could not handle her. Her value was itself a problem—or perhaps I should say her value was the only problem. But even if I could not handle her now, it was possible I would be able to use her freely in the future, and even a pawn I could not handle had its uses.

“Then, Kizutaka, today's theme is what business?”

“I think I might be able to help you out.”

“Oh?” Risuka said, pulling the utility knife out of the holster in her belt. Schk schk schk schk schk schk schk schk schk schk she slid it in and out, in and out. This was a habit of hers, and that utility knife was, in a manner of speaking, Risuka's magic wand. “Curious. Tell me more.”

“A week ago, quite by coincidence, I was witness to a very strange incident. Common sense failed to explain it, so I thought I should bring it to you. There is a chance it will coincide with your goals.”

“Oh! Most grateful to Kizutaka.”

As anyone who heard her talk would notice instantly, Risuka's manner of speaking was a little unnatural. The way she pronounced things was slightly odd: The accent she put on my name made it impossible to guess what the kanji might be, as if the vowels were coming from Latin instead of Japanese. Risuka was not yet very fluent in what we called Japanese. Language was not my best subject, but even so, her vocabulary was far worse than mine,

and it seemed she had not quite managed to wrap her head around the concept of particles. She was much worse when I first met her. Obviously, in Nagasaki, they also speak Japanese ... the language of Yamato, but they had spent so long in seclusion behind the Gate that the respective grammars had diverged to the point where the language they spoke seemed more like an exotic foreign language than one spoken within our own country. (As much a part of our country as the Kingdom of Magic could really be said to be.) So, when Risuka attempted to speak Japanese with me, her meaning was rarely lost, but it did tend to come across like a bad translation from the German (possibly because of her tendency to emphasize proper nouns). Just now, where she should have said, "I'm grateful to you," she said, "Most grateful to Kizutaka," as if making a point of all the people not me that she was not grateful to.

Other examples would be trying to say "Lying leads to stealing" and having it come out "Stealing comes from lying," or "Someone is looking at us, but I don't know who or where" becoming "What I do not know is who is looking at us from where."

With short sentences like these, it was easy enough to reconstruct her meaning, but when she tried to express a longer, more complicated idea, I had to listen very, very carefully if I wanted to understand her correctly. She was getting better. A year spent talking to me had helped. Obviously, as far as Risuka was concerned, our language was probably the one that was strange and hard to follow, but when in Rome, do as the Romans do, so Risuka was trying hard to talk like us. Chamberlain, on the other hand, spoke Japanese perfectly, even though he looked like a Westerner.

"Well? The story you have brought me is what kind of tale to you?"

"Last Sunday, at 6:32, in Hakata's New Kizuna Station, four people all jumped onto the tracks together. They were hit by the train and their bodies shredded. You heard about it?"

"Mm ..." Risuka said, pulling out the big bottom drawer of her desk and taking out a massive file. The file said "June 1st-June 15th" on it. It was a collection of newspaper articles. Risuka flipped through the pages, the handcuffs on her wrist clanking. "Oh, that would be this, yes? I remember, I remember. Um, Kagawa Sakiro, Yana Harusame, Manabe Saki, and Tainaka Umi, yes. A high school student, a businessman, a housewife, and a housekeeper—sadly, pictures of them I have none."

"I remember what they look like. I was standing right behind them."

"Oh? That is coincidence."

"I don't need to tell you what this means, do I, Risuka? I think you know that I am not the kind of person who would shove four strangers off a subway platform without good reason. Which makes this truth ... extremely mysterious."

"... Mysterious, mm?" Risuka said, nodding gravely. There was not likely to be anything important in the paper, but she read the article carefully. "So Kizutaka believes magic in this case is involved."

"Right," I agreed. "We've seen mind-control magic before. ... I also thought telekinetic powers were a possibility."

When Risuka sat in silence, not responding, I awkwardly added, "Not that I can do more than guess with magic...." I wasn't completely clueless, but it was important to say things like this to her. I did not trust Risuka enough to show her all my cards, nor was I completely reliant on her.

"... Hmm," she said after thinking things over. She put the file down and turned to me. "I have problem with all mysterious or inexplicable things blaming on magic.... But, Kizutaka, what we should be most frightened of is that mistake. Magic, in most cases, in normal life, it is not so useful. It makes no real difference if it is there or not. Witch hunts and inquisitions modern magic is not strong enough to fight."

"I know that without your telling me. That is why I waited a week. If they figured out some logical explanation in a week, then I would have assumed magic was not involved." However hapless they might be, the police could be relied upon to do that much, through sheer numbers. But for a full week, all those hapless numbers had done was look for witnesses. "But now? I thought I should bring it to you. I can't be certain, but you can find out if it was magic or not, right?"

"Mm ...," Risuka said, tidying up her desk. She put the notebook away in her desk, thinking. The handcuffs clanked. "Mind control and telekinesis are both high-level magic. And high-level magicians do not kill people at random, inside the Gate or out. Unless there is some kind of... missing link among those four?"

"Probably not. From what I observed, there was nothing connecting them at all. Other than the fact that they all happened to be standing there."

"Mm. Well, if we imagine it was mind control, that magic is very complicated; I think it is not a pattern we find likely. Um, but... it does bother me. If Kizutaka thinks so ..."

"Talking about it won't get us anywhere," I said, deciding to push things. "Proof is better than theories; if you have time, we could go to the scene and investigate. All we can do here is speculate."

“Time? The concept of time is problem that is immensely trivial where I am concerned,” Risuka said, with a slightly twisted smile that did not seem to belong to her face. “... But, yes, if I see the scene, certainly, the problem becomes clear. New Kizuna Station ... How long from here does it take?”

“Including train changes ... two or three hours? Here’s a map. And the train schedules.” I had prepared these in advance (a simple matter of xeroxing the relevant documents) and handed them to Risuka. “You’ll have to take care of any extra details.”

“Okay. My hat?”

“Mm,” I said, picking up the big red, pointy hat lying on the floor in front of the closet. While I did, Risuka took the utility knife and made a deep cut through the glove into her index finger. A small amount of red blood seeped out. She put the utility knife back in the holster, took the hat from me, and put it on. The hat was too big for her and came down over her eyes. She was always pushing it back. “Thank you.”

“Have a good trip, Risuka.”

“I hope to,” she said, grinning. And Mizukura Risuka suddenly, with no warning, vanished into thin air. Literally vanished—she didn’t move at all. No, her existence took a shortcut through time and space, leaving the chair where she had been sitting empty. I stood up from my cushion and sat down on her chair. I leaned against the backrest. I could still feel her warmth on it. I smiled faintly to myself—a very deliberate smile.

“I left the door open on purpose, to suggest she should try leaving through it.... Oh well,” I murmured. “Let us hope that this time, for once, we get a magician worth using.”

★★★

Mizukura Risuka’s magic was Destiny Interference; her pattern was Water, and her category was Time. Destiny Interference was a type of magic so rare that just having it qualified as a third-rank technique; so that alone should tell you how exceptional Risuka was. But despite this (because of this), I had decided Risuka was a bit beyond me—her magic could affect destiny only within her own body. If I break that down so anyone can understand it, she had the ability to control the time inside of her. For example, in this instance, she had omitted the time spent riding trains to New Kizuna Station in Hakata, Fukuoka. One might easily assume she had not jumped forward in time but had jumped sideways in space, but time and space being

fundamentally the same is such a famous fact that even the most normal, unremarkable of my classmates were aware of it, and, of course, Risuka could omit time alone, without space having to be involved. For example, a moment ago, she had injured her finger with her beloved utility knife.

An injury that would take three days to heal, but Risuka could omit those three days. Destiny Interference—not a phrase to be taken lightly. By omitting that time, Risuka was changing the future. From tiny things like not having to pay train fare to much more significant things. You could even say that Risuka’s magic was the power to change the future. Those words alone suggested this was a magic I definitely wanted to have under my thumb, and when Risuka had first told me about it a year ago, and I had first seen it happen (now that I have seen how meaningless it is, a rather embarrassing memory), I was very excited indeed. But, sadly, it was a bit beyond me. Her magic affected the destiny only within her body. When she skipped time, her memories did not follow suit. (She might jump five hours into the future, but she would not have memories of those hours. Her memories and thoughts were the same as they had been five hours before.) If she started copying a magic book, as she often did, assumed it would take three hours, and fast-forwarded that much time... the magic book would remain uncopied (as Risuka put it, changing clothes might be a pain, but you still have to do it), which meant this magic was, in almost every case, completely useless to anyone but her. It was a little different from a simple teleportation ability. There was a method that made it possible to move through time and space with her, but omission or fast-forwarding, either one involved the passage of time, which meant that jumping two hours forward meant you had two hours less to live. If I were a simpleminded fool, that might not matter, but two hours taken away from me mean two hours less things for me to think, and that was a monumental waste of time I did not find remotely amusing. Also, at the moment, ten-year-old Mizukura Risuka was able to move only forward in time—on the basis that time was irreversible—so she could not gain back the time she had lost. And the time she could erase was (technically) limited to ten days. Ten days at a time, but piled up on top of each other, you could easily chip your life away....

“But Risuka will not die young,” I whispered. “She is, after all, a bona fide witch.”

The Red Witch of Time. She earned that nickname at the age of seven, in her homeland, the magical city of Moriyashiki. Even within the Kingdom of Magic, even by their standards, Risuka was a brilliant witch. Apparently. But Risuka’s brilliance had little to do with her—it was all her father’s doing. Yes, her father. Her father was himself Risuka’s goal. Mizukura Risuka’s purpose in life. You could put it as simply as “looking for her father.”

At this point, my thoughts were interrupted. The phone on Risuka’s desk rang. I knew who it was, so I answered.

“Hello? Kizutaka?”

“Yeah.”

“Sorry. I must apologize. The mistake, it was mine. This is with magic involved. Sorry, I should not have lectured.”

“Oh,” I said, nodding. This was not exactly a surprise. “So, what now?”

“Mm ... It is magic, but I do not think it is the work of a magician. Um ... if that makes sense. Kizutaka, you should come here. It is easier to explain if you are here. This phone is in the station, but I will come and get you now.”

“No need. I’ll take the train. I don’t want to waste any more of my life. And since we don’t know what’s going to happen after this, you shouldn’t waste any of your magic. You must conserve your magic as I conserve my time. I had planned to go to that station today even if you did not agree to come, so I have the money ready. Mind waiting for me?”

“I am forever praising how Kizutaka is always prepared. Fine. Please tell Chamberlain I am here.”

I hung up and went downstairs. The shop was open by now but remained empty. Only Chamberlain, standing behind the counter. Honestly, if there were that many people deranged enough to pay two thousand yen for a cup of coffee, the city would be doomed. I had a child’s tastes and did not like coffee. I was fine with canned coffee, but Chamberlain would not allow anyone to add milk and sugar. He had standards. I genuinely hoped that one day I would be able to enjoy his coffee—but had no idea if my relationship with Risuka would continue that long. If it did, then I would have had to grow to the point where I could fit everything about her in the palm of my hand ... or else I would have lost my future completely. The latter option made me shudder. That would mean I had fallen to the same level as my thoughtless, hedonistic classmates and talentless teachers, like all the pathetic, failed, nonmagical humans out there. And there seemed little point in enjoying coffee once your life has failed. I would rather be drinking cyanide. I told Chamberlain, “Risuka went to Fukuoka. I’m headed there, too,” putting things as simplistically as I could. He bowed low. “Look after her, Master Kugi.” Risuka might be a bit too much for me, but this old man trusted me completely. It was not that hard to get adults to trust you. Especially old people. Chamberlain was also from Moriyashiki, the magical city, but could not use magic at all. He was a wizard with no magic—the meaning of which I was reserving judgment on. According to Risuka, making good coffee was his magic, but I had no intention of accepting that semantic obfuscation.

Either way, it seemed that Chamberlain genuinely could not use magic; not a smart hawk hiding his claws, so getting to the bottom of the issue was

a relatively low priority as far as I was concerned. It hardly hurt to have a coffee shop owner among one's pawns. "Of course. I'll make sure she gets home today; don't worry. You can concentrate on work," I said, and tried to leave the shop. But the automatic doors did not budge. The doors were triggered not by a sensor but by weight, and they would occasionally have trouble detecting me. The continued use of such an outmoded and flawed automatic door system was my least favorite thing about this coffee shop. I jumped as high as I could and slammed my full weight down on the mat. The doors opened, and at last I could leave. I began walking toward the nearest subway station, where I would board a train and begin my journey to Fukuoka.

"So it was magic ... but not the work of a magician? Now that is hardly bad news for either of us." While Risuka would have skipped the entire journey, I spent it thinking things through carefully. "Those who were born magicians tend to be too problematic to make good pawns ... but if someone becomes a magician later? They might have potential."

People from beyond the Gate, people born in Nagasaki Prefecture, wizards and witches ... they were right next door to Saga Prefecture, where I lived, but as I said, it was like a foreign country, with a different culture and very little in common. Even with Risuka, there was something fundamentally off about our interaction that was yet another reason I found her hard to handle. I was exceptionally gifted at understanding other people's personalities, but where Risuka was concerned, I had to admit I would occasionally make mistakes. For example, in this case, four people had died—a truth that did not bother me in the slightest—but once, in a similar case, Risuka had said, "The dead people each had families, friends, lovers, enemies, teachers, students ... and when they died, all those connections, they vanished. The killer broke all that, which I cannot forgive." Which might sound like cheap humanism, but when Risuka said it, it felt different, which bothered me. I agreed that even the most worthless of fools had a right to live, but I did not think that opinion matched Risuka's. If all magicians had these odd disconnects, then that put me at a disadvantage. One of the reasons I continued working with Risuka even though I was not sure I could handle her was because being with her greatly increased my chances of meeting other magicians. Indeed, I had met several other magicians over the last year, but with no satisfactory results. Some of them had had more constructive magic than Risuka's, but unless the magician involved would make a good pawn, that meant little. Tools and humans were both evaluated on whether or not I could use them. In that sense, magicians were all more or less problematic. But... if there were someone who was not a congenital magician? Someone who had acquired the ability later in life? They had started as an ordinary human, and that might give me an angle. Of course, only comparatively... And the preference for a human with magic over a magician went for Risuka as well. If someone had learned magic late in life, that meant someone had taught them—and only the devil could do that.

“Thanks for waiting,” I said, dismounting at New Kizuna Station, in Hakata, Fukuoka, for the first time in a week and moving to the first platform, where I found Risuka sitting on a bench, schk schk schk schk schking her utility knife and looking very bored. She pushed the hat back on her head and said, “I always have to wait,” sounding a little annoyed. If her abilities had worked on her environment instead of herself, she would not have had to be so bored. She stood up, adjusting the hat again.

“So, Risuka, results?”

“The place where you were standing—which is also the place where the four ‘sacrifices’ jumped and died—is there, yes?” she said, pointing at a white line on the platform. “On the tracks there is a Magic Formula.”

“A formula? Not a sigil?”

“Formula,” Risuka said shortly.

I walked in the direction she had pointed and looked down at the tracks; naturally, I could see nothing. I would not be able to see either a Magic Sigil or a Formula without undergoing a certain procedure, a procedure for which I was not qualified.

“A Magic Formula... That means the killer was here when it happened. So there’s a chance I might have seen them.”

“Mm... yeah,” Risuka said, coming over to me. The handcuffs on her right wrist clanked with each step she took, like a bell around a cat’s neck. “I will let you see. Kizutaka, be moving aside.”

As she spoke, she cut her finger with the utility knife and let a drop of blood fall onto the tracks. A moment later, the cut on her finger healed, leaving only the one in her glove. She had omitted the healing time. On the tracks, a complicated red pattern appeared, faint but clear. It was indeed a Magic Formula. It was not the first time I had seen one, but every time I did, I felt my head imploding from the sheer horrific complexity of the thing.

According to Risuka, humans who could not use magic, who had no resistance or immunity, had indeed gone crazy after spending too long staring at a Magic Formula or Sigil. The formula was visible only for a couple of seconds. I looked around the platform. It was the middle of the day, and a Sunday, but this was not a large city, and the station was relatively empty. Nobody seemed to be giving us suspicious looks. We must look just like a couple of kids and probably did not attract much attention. At least, not to fools unable to correctly evaluate their surroundings. It was exhausting to have to control such feeble minds. And I had a lot of that ahead of me.

“This Magic Formula is very low-level,” Risuka said. “The very fact that they are using a Magic Formula for a spell this simple means the culprit is clearly not from Nagasaki.... Still..

Shortly after we met, Risuka had explained that magic was a lot like math—in that it was a part of ordinary life, something anyone could do if they worked at it. As long as they had time, anyone could eventually master the techniques. As the name implies, a Magic Formula was just like a mathematical one, while a Magic Sigil is something much more complicated. A Magic Sigil is essentially a trap; the caster does not need to be in the vicinity—it will activate on its own when a certain set of conditions are met. A Magic Formula, on the other hand, was a shortcut, like a cheat. To explain it very roughly, you would draw the formula on the object you intended to enchant to lessen the amount of time you would spend chanting the spell. Preparations made in advance of the spell’s actual use, to simplify things when the time came. Strangely, this was also the basis of Risuka’s magic, her time skipping—although she needed neither to draw a complicated pattern nor to spend any time at all chanting.... Magic is incredibly complex.

Anyway, as I said, a Magic Sigil is a trap and is itself magic, so it can activate automatically no matter where the spellcaster is, allowing for remote casting. On the other hand, a Magic Formula is nothing but a formula, cannot be operated remotely, and the caster must be standing close to it. So the killer in this case must have been right next to me. Right. Next. To. Me.

.. But, Risuka, why is the Magic Formula drawn on the tracks? Mind control or telekinesis, in both cases the spell would be cast on the four sacrifices, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes. Mind control or telekinesis is not being the magic used here,” Risuka said, grinning. “This is Summoning— pattern of Wind. Summoned was, probably... a vacuum.”

“Someone summoned a vacuum?”

“Yes. A fact that just proves how low-level they are. Vacuums compose most of the universe, a very available thing,” Risuka said, looking down at the tracks again, right at the spot where the formula had briefly shown itself. “That aside, this killer summoned a large vacuum over the tracks. And what does Kizutaka think happened then?”

“... Oh.”

The four victims had been sucked toward the tracks—just as I had said. Brute force such as that eliminated the need for high-level magic such as mind control or telekinesis. It was almost a trick. Summoning (basically teleporting a space that did not include yourself?) was low-level magic (five

ranks below Risuka's movements through time), and it made sense that it would be even easier if you were summoning something as close to nothing as a vacuum was. And the use of a Magic Formula for such a simplistic spell was definitive proof that the killer was not a magician, was not from Nagasaki.

"Hopes dashed, Kizutaka?" Risuka said impishly. "Magic that weak will not be useful to Kizutaka's army."

"... Mm." I did not like that smile. Had she taken it into her head that she understood me? Fine, I would forgive her. "High or low difficulty, high- or low-level, no ability can be measured by strength or weakness. What matters is how well that ability can be used. True strength, Risuka, means knowing the stage where your talents can shine. That goes for normal humans or magicians. I don't think we can really say you're making full use of your control of time, your Destiny Interference Magic. It is a very powerful magic, but it has almost no meaning. Having a talent you cannot use is the same as having no talent at all."

.. Well, that may be so," Risuka agreed. "Oh, and, Kizutaka ... not taking back what I said entirely, but it is possible this killer is not a complete pansy. Controlling a vacuum—if you have a formula ready, it is like using a kamaitachi."

"Kamaitachi? A vacuum blade?"

"Not as powerful as hitting with a train ... but dangerous enough. There is also the issue of vacuum permittivity—but perhaps worst of all is summoning a vacuum over our coordinates. The principle is the same as being flung into space without a space suit. But this defines the enemy's magic. Pattern is Wind, category is Summoning. Then... his purpose ... We know the means, which removes simultaneous and impossible, but the problem of no connection remains. This, I have no idea how to solve."

"If the killer can use magic, then the matter is a simple one. As I keep telling you, when humans acquire a means of violence beyond their normal abilities, past or present, east or west, they have done only two things. Used that means of violence to undermine their superiors or used it to stomp on their inferiors."

"... Oh yes, like Kizutaka's classmates pouring hot water into the anthill."

"Precisely. An idiot convinced he has become strong always feels the need to test that power. Unaware that this merely proves how shallow his thinking is."

Jesus, Risuka had made me remember things about my classmates I would prefer to have forgotten. I would at least like to forget those abortions

on a Sunday, when I was with Risuka. The same age as me, but they never made any effort to think; they were worse than animals. Certainly, they were more of a nuisance. They could not even begin to imagine what literal battlefields they would find themselves standing on in the future if they did not start preparing themselves now. Lack of knowledge might be a problem caused by their environment, but the least they could do was think for themselves about the time that lay ahead of them. Why did nobody see the danger in spoiling children until they turn into small adults, like canned coffee? There ought to have been at least one person in the school who was able to tell that I was different. If that had happened, I would have welcomed that enemy with open arms. Fine, I will tolerate your imbecility for the time being. Go on, read mystery novels, convince yourselves that you are smart.

“... Even if there was no Magic Formula, what is certain is that the killer was close by. If he was testing his violence, then he would want to watch. To see his strength with his own eyes.”

“Right... hmm ... right next to me ... ?”

The victims had been right in front of me, so where else could he have been? In retrospect, I had been in pretty serious danger. If I had taken so much as a step forward—or if there had been one person fewer in front of me—I would have been sucked into the vacuum on the tracks. And I would have died. I had been lucky. How horrible it would have been to die there, without having done anything concrete ... mm? No, wait....

“Risuka. This Magic Formula ... how good is it? How much of the chant can the caster omit with it? How long would it ultimately take someone to cast the spell?”

“How long ... Four people, at this distance, summoning a vacuum that could suck them in... It depends on the caster’s class, but with this class of Magic Formula... A rough estimate is ... about one second.”

“Hmph.”

“So what about it? It is a terrible Magic Formula.... A little algebra, and he could have simplified it greatly. Last time, it was the same.... Is this the limit of what ordinary humans can comprehend?” Risuka slid the blade out of her utility knife and cut her fingertip through the glove again. “Twice he will not do the same thing in the same place. But I shall destroy this Magic Formula anyway.”

“Yeah, go ahead.”

“Okay...” Risuka spun the utility knife. It looked as if nothing happened, but she gave a satisfied nod. “Disposal complete. Too simple.”

What Risuka had just done was called a Cancel. A simple spell that rendered a Magic Formula, Magic Sigil, or magic itself ineffective. It was not that hard to perform, but neither was it a very simple one. Risuka, and Risuka alone, could pull it off without even chanting a spell. In the vast majority of cases, Risuka did not need to chant spells. Because inside her body (just a little taller than my own) was something that functioned as a Magic Formula—her blood. Every conceivable Magic Formula was already programmed into her body.

That was why she was a Second Grade Magic Technician despite her youth—despite her childishness. That was why she was a genius. When Risuka needed to use magic, all she had to do was let blood flow—cut her fingertip with a knife, and she was done. Hence the Red Witch of Time. And it was her father who had put such an advanced Magic Formula in her blood—Mizukura Shingo, current whereabouts unknown. Risuka was looking for him. She had come through the Gate to look for him. Her eyes were peeled wide open, desperately searching for a clue to his whereabouts, any clue, no matter how small. Even a case like this—knowing how he enjoyed teaching humans how to use magic.

“What do you think the odds are this is your father’s work?”

“Mm... My father can use all patterns, all categories.

Omni. It feels a little too sloppy to be my father’s teachings ... but that may just be the human factor.”

“I can’t imagine there are many magicians crazy enough to teach humans magic.”

“True. Then we should decide to track him down,” Risuka suggested, finally getting down to business. For all our efforts, we had found no clues at all recently, and she must be getting rather desperate. Magicians cannot cross water, so Mizukura Shingo could not have gone anywhere; if he was alive, he could not have left Kyushu. But she had been looking for him for two years without catching his scent. (Of course, we could also blame some of that on the way she had been searching that first year.) “Kizutaka is the witness, so Kizutaka will be needing to remember anyone suspicious.”

“Easier said than done.... We could have solved the whole thing if only magic could have told us the killer.”

“Precognition and Postcognition are advanced Destiny Interference. I have yet to meet anyone with those abilities.”

“Yeah. Um ... So you said he would have had to chant about a second? No one near me said anything that sounded like a spell. I’m sure I would have noticed.”

“Yes. Kizutaka has experience, can tell if a spell is a spell if Kizutaka hears it.”

“With a Magic Formula such as that, how close would the caster need to be? With a Magic Sigil, they can be as far away as they like, but with a few exceptions, Magic Formulas don’t work like that, right?”

“Fifteen feet... maybe thirty is the limit, I think. Too close and it would work on him, and he would be hit by the train. I would have thought the sweet spot was where Kizutaka was, right behind them, where he could easily see them die.”

“But I can’t use even the simplest magic.”

“Sweet spot number two, then ... right behind Kizutaka. Kizutaka is short; grown-ups could see over your head with no problem.”

“I thought of that,” I said, and gave her my prepared answer. “But as I said, if someone standing right behind me had chanted for a full second, I would have noticed. Most people would have.”

“Regardless of whether non-Kizutaka witnesses would have noticed ... Kizutaka certainly would have, yes. Kizutaka is never not paying attention.”

“Which means we’ll have to find sweet spot number three.... Where else could you see the four of them die? Somewhere close ... The next door over? No.” I shook my head. “On the right, the train would be in the way, and to the left, bits of them would get on you. Which would be bad. The left is probably more likely, but... can’t say it’s the best angle, no.”

“Mm ...” Risuka moved over to where the next door to the left was marked on the platform. She looked in the direction the train would come from. “Here is dangerous ... a little ... fast, would splatter very hard.”

With a three- or four-door car, it might be possible, but the subway used two-door cars, and the door to the left would have been in the same car, which ruled it out. Five meters away... somewhere the bits would not splatter ... well behind the line for that train door. Logically, given those three conditions, he would be standing almost out of range.

“But by the process of elimination, there’s nowhere else he could have been. I wonder who ... It wasn’t that crowded, so I doubt I forgot them, but... I guess I wasn’t paying attention. I should have been prepared for the people in front of me to jump. Or if not that, then once I had witnessed that, watched the commotion around me carefully.”

“Then Kizutaka would be a suspect. Kizutaka was right to run. The ones still looking for Kizutaka are the police.”

“They can look all they like. I wouldn’t say I ran, but... I guess I kinda did.... Ah!” I clapped my hands together. “Risuka, we have another option! Turn the tables on the way we were thinking. What if one of the four was able to use magic? What do you think? The two right next to me couldn’t have, but the guy in front could have chanted a spell for a second without my noticing.”

“Mm ... So, suicide? All four of them together, it seems so roundabout....”

“No need for it to be all four. Just one of them, and the other three were just unlucky. Of course, it could have been a group suicide, but given the lack of connection among them, it seems more likely they were just dragged along.”

Which meant I had to change the way I was thinking about the killer. That would mean he had obtained power but not used either choice usually taken. It also meant he was already dead—which would make him useless to both of us, but neither of us was so closed-minded as to be unable to find any value in even a useless thing. After all, wasn’t there something rather impressive about using magic to pull yourself onto the tracks instead of just jumping? The people dragged with you were not the most aesthetically pleasing aspect of it, but that was a trivial concern.

But Risuka dismissed the idea quickly. “Did I not say? Suicide by magic is not possible.”

“... You can’t... commit suicide?” I had been involved with magic for a year now, but this was a new one for me. “Whyever not? I mean, you told me yourself about a wizard who died by his own Magic Sigil.”

“That was an accident, negligence—not suicide. Mm You understand ... magic is not physical. It is mental, yes?”

To do anything, your mind must be focused. In that sense, it is a more animalistic action. You could say instinctive? More generally, any ability is a means of turning something from weak to strong, no? Magic is the same. All living things have defense mechanism. To cut your wrist,” Risuka said, pointing at hers with the utility knife, “is easy when you are out of control, but to perform magic, you must be in control. You must always be thinking when you are doing calculus, yes? The same. Even if you are using Magic Formula or Magic Sigil, it is the same.”

“Hmm ... I did not know that, but it does make perfect sense. How careless of me. Sorry to make you waste your time explaining that.”

“Even in the Kingdom of Magic, only one magician was ever able to commit suicide.”

“There was one? Who?”

“My father,” Risuka said awkwardly, as if confessing something shameful. “Because he can use Regeneration and Resurrection.”

“... As always, some father you’ve got there.”

Mizukura Shingo. The more stories ... legends ... I heard about him, the more I wanted him as a pawn, but again, he might well be a little beyond me. After all, he was Risuka’s father, the man who made her. A pawn that was too powerful would be even harder to use than Risuka. But it did not sound as if he was someone it could hurt to meet, and I expected my relationship with Risuka would, at the least, continue until we had found him. During that time, I might manage to find other useful magicians. If I’m being honest, until I met Risuka, I had assumed that magicians were simply exceptional humans. In much the same way as stupid adults assume that everything Westerners do is right. Which is exactly why I was so excited when I met Risuka. If I had known then how unimpressive most magicians really are, I’m sure I would have remained much more collected. Including Risuka, not one of the magicians—and humans who had been taught magic—whom I had met had even come close to mastering their magic, their own powers. I could not for the life of me understand why they did not seem to view this as a waste. The world is genuinely full of hopeless incompetents. So many born second-rate, not usable even as pawns ... She might be a bit much for me, but in that sense, Risuka wasn’t that bad.

“... Ah,” Risuka said suddenly. “There was one more sweet spot, Kizutaka.”

“Mm? Where?”

“Over there,” she said, pointing at the opposite platform. Platform number 2, where I had stepped off the train from Hakata Station. She had pointed with her right hand, and the handcuffs on her wrist clanked together.

“... Oh.” Right across from this was a boarding point for trains on that platform. He could stand there, waiting ... the perfect place. Close enough, and yet far enough that he would not be dragged into the summoned vacuum. (Even less risk than our first sweet spot, the place where I’d been standing.) “Nice. That would be the best place.”

“Let’s go.”

“Mm.”

There were only two platforms in New Kizuna Station. There was a passage between them a floor above. We went up the stairs and down the other side, onto the second platform. They were both equally deserted. This suited us perfectly. Even if Risuka had no intention of hiding it, if someone saw her skipping time and suddenly appearing and disappearing, an

unfortunate pandemonium would undoubtedly follow. This was what Chamberlain had meant when he told me to look after her. Some of the stupid, pathetic humans called the magicians “half demons” — simply because they were different—and detested them. The same ideas that led to witch hunts. Few things in life were more idiotic. Even if the government denied the existence of magic, even if the Gate separated them from us, what was there was there. Part of the problem could certainly be blamed on the Kingdom of Magic’s standoffishness, and their tendency to look down on humans this side of the Gate as “powerless,” but grown-ups should not be having childish fights like that.

They had these abilities; make use of them! Cowards, not even attempting to grasp reality. Convinced they would look smart if they sneered enough while debating the matter. Even though it was no debate, merely an exchange of dismissals. They are not fit even to play bad chess; if they worked really hard at it, they might manage checkers.

“Here,” Risuka said, standing in the sweet spot. “Mm ... He could see well from here. This is perfect, Kizutaka. The one standing at the front of the line for this door was the killer. The police checked only the first platform, which is why he chose this side. Kizutaka ... do you remember him? Did you see anyone suspicious standing here?”

“... I don’t know. Until they jumped, their bodies were blocking my view, and after they jumped, the train was in the way. If I did see anyone over here, it would have been only a glimpse; even I’m not that good.”

“Mm. Then we are stuck.”

“No, we have options. Humans are creatures of habit— they all have patterns. It is possible the killer is someone who often used the second platform here at New Kizuna Station. Humans tend to test things within their territory. Perhaps he always stands here. It may have felt comfortable to him. It is not a very big town, so if we search thoroughly, we should be able to track him down, as unguarded as he seems to be.”

“Ah ... So much work,” Risuka said, moving back and collapsing on a bench. She looked down at the map and train schedule I had given her in her room. Wondering if she should have brought her newspaper collection, no doubt. “We will have to lay a sigil down and wait patiently again, yes?”

“Yep.”

“I do not like drawing sigils. I have to use my own blood, and if I make the sigil too big, I get anemic. And drawing it that small—such a pain.”

This did not sound like someone who seemed to enjoy copying nightmarishly complicated grimoires out by hand, but since I could not use

magic, I suppose I do not fully understand the subtleties. But since this was our only means of progressing, whether the process failed to provide enjoyment or enjoyment failed to provide a process, she had to go through with it. There might not be many people here, but it would still attract attention, so we might have to select a different time ... but at any rate, coming here had not been a waste of time. That, at least, was some consolation. Risuka might be freely distributed at a whim, but even if children rode half price, it still cost a lot to cross prefectural lines. I looked down at the watch on my left wrist—a device that meant little to Risuka. It was just past noon. Mm, it was about the right time; perhaps we should eat something. Risuka never carried a wallet, so I would have to pay, but I could put that down as expenses. She would pay it back by helping to advance my plans.

“Say, Risuka ... let’s get out of here.”

No answer. Risuka was sitting on the bench; she had already put the map and schedule away and was staring up at the ceiling. Schk schk schk schk... schk schk schk schk schk. .. unconsciously sliding the blade of her utility knife in and out. Schk schk schk... schk schk schk... schk schk schk... schk schk schk... schk schk schk...

“Um, Risuka?” I said, without much hope. When Risuka was concentrating hard, as when she was copying a grimoire, she never noticed voices. Risuka’s magic was not the only thing that was locked up inside her. “Risuka!”

“Kizutaka,” she said, looking at me at last. Her hat had fallen down over her eyes again, so she pushed it back. “It may be that I know the killer.”

“Eh?”

“Mm... Yes, this is ... probably no mistake. I think. Well, no ... If one second, then possible. But only that makes sense. In which case ... this is not the case we thought it was, Kizutaka.”

“What do you mean?”

“Is it possible to speak with the driver of the train that hit those four people? If we can... I think we will solve this case.”

“The driver ... ? I’m pretty sure they’re investigating him for professional negligence resulting in death. But I doubt he’s been arrested or anything. I can’t say for sure unless I ask my father, and even if I do, this is Fukuoka Prefecture and not his jurisdiction.” My father was a high-ranking officer in the Saga Police Department. I almost never saw him, but he came in handy in situations like this. He mostly made life difficult for me, but he was also no idiot. “But do you really think the driver knows something?”

“You could say that.”

“Well... can't hurt to ask. Can I borrow your telephone card?”

She handed it over, and I headed down the platform to the pay phone. I reached up and took the receiver and placed the card in the slot. I tried to dial my father's cell, but the buttons were too high, and I accidentally pressed 5 instead of 2.1 put the receiver down and tried again. What the hell were pay phone designers thinking? Why were they so high up? I had used a card this time, but when I wanted to use coins, I had to find something to stand on or I couldn't reach the slot. Adults all have cell phones, so they should at least make the pay phones with kids in mind. Situations like this come about when those in charge are fools. If you have no talent, then all you should do is resign yourself to being used by your betters. Your whole life. My second attempt at dialing was successful, and I was connected to my father's cell. After the polite greetings society required of us, I asked about the driver in question. He had indeed been booked, as I had known, but the accident had left him in a state of shock, so he had been placed in the Hakata City Police Hospital. Not a surprising outcome for a small-scale human who had killed four people. The driver's name was Takamine Koutarou, forty-seven years old, single, with no family. He had already resigned from the company. Resigned. With trains, unlike cars, the driver could bear no responsibility for something like this, so the charges of professional negligence in the line of duty were a mere formality, and he would not have been fired. But with all that had happened, it was not surprising. After getting as much information as I could, I asked my father if it was possible for me to meet the driver. The Fukuoka Police had asked all the questions they were going to ask by now, and it seemed as if it would be possible—not for two children alone, but if he accompanied us. My father knew about Risuka, so that would not require explanation. (Of course, he did not know that she was a witch.) My father rather doted on her. I had never cared for adults who spoiled children.... Not that I mean to cast judgment on the values of others. He was a busy man, and there was (apparently) paperwork involved, since it was outside his jurisdiction, so it would have to wait till next Sunday. I accepted this, we agreed on a time and place, and I hung up and went back to Risuka.

“Sorry that took so long. That man can talk. Only seven points left.”

“Not a problem. Any results?”

“All good. Next Sunday, 11:00 a.m., meeting him outside the Hakata City Police Hospital.”

“Hospital?”

“He's been hospitalized with shock. Some paperwork and processing, so we'd probably be in the room by 11:30 or 12 : 00 .”

“Very well,” Risuka said, smiling. “If it is true that I can go where that man is, then I can skip to there whether it is this week or next.”

“The hospital... you know the coordinates? Need a map?”

“I have been to the Hakata Police Hospital once before, is not a problem. The room number?”

“Room 603. Private room, given the circumstances.”

“Perfect... Should be easy to cover. Kizutaka, this time, you will join me? I will not wait a week.”

“Fine ... Can’t say I like losing a week of my life, but I am curious to see what you’ll ask him.”

I held out my left hand. As a sort of ritualistic precaution, I looked around; nobody was paying any attention to us. I need not even have bothered; worms crawling in the dirt, the lot of them. Ignorance on such a scale was a crime. Mozart was always a nice guy; Salieri was always the villain? Yes, and twenty years from now, I shall give you all lives of luxury. If you manage to survive that long. Anyway, Risuka’s magic worked only within her own body. She could bring only inorganic material with her through time; organic material was quite difficult... but not impossible. To bring me with her, she had to link my blood to hers—the foundation of her magic—and stabilize that connection. In other words ...

.. Ow.”

Risuka cut the palm of my hand with her utility knife, then cut the palm of her own right hand. Her glove was covered in cuts already. Then we linked our cuts together like puzzle pieces, locking our fingers. Next, Risuka took one of the cuffs off her right wrist and snapped it onto my left wrist. The handcuffs would stabilize our hands, so that nothing could pull them apart. Finally, Risuka wrapped her left arm around my waist, and I put my right arm around hers, as if we were embracing. Her waist was very thin and fragile, like any girl in my class. Barely any flesh to her at all, but somehow still soft rather than bony. Her hand on my back was somehow uncomfortable.

“Egunamu Egunamu Kaatoriikii ka Ikaisa Miira Toriimariihi...” Risuka began to chant. Jumping a full week was impossible without a chant, even for Risuka. It occurred to me that I should have pretended to beg and tried to get my father to take us sooner, even if only by a day. It shamed me to waste my pawn’s energy. “Egunamu Egunamu Kaatoriikii ka Ikaisa Miira Toriimartiku ...”

And...

Since we were moving through time, it was impossible for our movement to take any time at all, either relatively or absolutely. The time omitted was not experienced at all. But relatively speaking, Risuka and I experienced a week in a single instant, and the trick was to convince your mind and body to keep up with that speed. What that actually came down to was compatibility with Risuka's blood. Even linked and stabilized, it was possible to fail. What happened then ... we shall not dwell upon. Fortunately, my name was Kugi Kizutaka, and my date of birth not that different from Risuka's ... which meant I was able to travel through time with her. Physically, that is; mentally, it felt as if the entire world were distorting around me and it was extremely uncomfortable. I always shut my eyes, even though I knew it was meaningless. To my shame. And then ...

A hoarse shriek.

I opened my eyes and found myself in a square white room—a hospital room. It seemed we had successfully moved through time ... and through space. Of course, only our relative time had progressed; by absolute time, a moment ago we had been standing on the second platform of New Kizuna Station—literally, only a moment before. A seedy-looking man was sitting up on the bed, staring at us in shock. Of course, from his point of view, we had just appeared out of thin air. Fortunately, there were no nurses or doctors in the room. It would have been much more difficult to cover things up if they had been here. Clearly, this seedy, graying, middle-aged man was the driver—Takamine Koutarou. He did look familiar: I had caught a slow-motion glimpse of him as the accident occurred.

“Wh-what? How'd you get in here? H-how did ... Why? Children...” He did not even try to hide his confusion. “N-no, doesn't matter, what...”

“Calm down. You're a grown-up, act like one,” I said soothingly. I was getting used to this part of things, after a year of it. The best thing to do when adults were doubting their own senses was to give them an easily understood answer—nothing in the world easier to trick. “You should pay more attention! We just...”

“I have but one thing I wish to ask you,” Risuka said, interrupting me. She never tried to speak until I had finished pulling the wool over their eyes, so this was very irregular. She carried right on, without waiting for Takamine to respond.

“Who taught you magic?”

All confusion and fear drained from Takamine's face. He chuckled softly and looked right through us.

“I see.... So you're the Red Witch of Time.”

Risuka just stared back at him. Her lack of denial was itself agreement.

“So you’ve come to pass judgment on me?”

“... I guess so,” Risuka said coolly.

While this was going on, my mind was quickly catching up. Of course, of course. Since it was a Magic Formula, we had assumed the caster was nearby—had assumed he must have been there the whole time. But if it was the train’s driver—then he was not on the scene until the moment the truth occurred. That was why his timing had been so perfect. One second—a borderline number, but the train had been slowing down, and if he chanted fast enough, he could summon a vacuum before the train had passed by.

“You understand now, Kizutaka?” Risuka said. “Yes, the best position was not where you were or on the second platform. The real sweet spot was on the train, in the driver’s seat. The one place where he was guaranteed a good view of everything.”

“B-but...” I said, watching him closely. “Why did he do it? Here he is, able to use magic ... and all he accomplishes is being charged with professional negligence resulting in death, losing his job, finding himself blamed by society... until he ends up in the hospital.”

“Blamed by society?” Takamine scoffed. “So what? Who cares? Boy—all I wanted was to run someone down with my train. Just once.”

When humans acquire a means of violence beyond their normal abilities, past or present, east or west, they do only two things. Use that means of violence to undermine their superiors or use it to stomp on their inferiors. He had chosen to stomp—within the realm of expectation—but the violence Takamine Koutarou had acquired was not magic, it was his train. A lump of iron not designed with an eye to what would happen when it ran into someone. Violence that could tear people apart like paper—a veritable symbol of destructive force. And the magic had been simply a means to enact that violence—nothing more than a means to his end. I could wrap my head around that concept but not shake off my disbelief. I could understand wanting to see people hit by a train. That was simply an extension of wanting to drive your sports car at 125 miles per hour, a feeling I was capable of comprehending.

It was a higher-level, less-infantile desire than wanting to kill people with magic, or wanting to drop people on the tracks with magic, and easier to understand. Easy to understand and comprehensible. Oh ... Trains ran only where the rails took them. No matter how much he wanted to hit someone, without magic, there was no way to guarantee he would ever be that “lucky.” Of course there had been no link among the four sacrifices. It all made sense.

I had no intention of dismissing that part of things. His stunned look had been bliss as his wish was granted—a bliss that had left him so out of it he had been sent to this hospital. In that sense, it certainly was easy to understand. But... but. Takamine had lost everything as a result. His job, his life, everything else—it was like suicide. There was no future in store for him. If you stomped that hard ... what was the point? And he had quit his job ... because he had achieved his goal? He had worked there for decades purely because he wanted to run into someone? But Takamine did not seem to notice my doubts.

“I’ve heard about you, Red Witch of Time,” he said, his attention fixed on Risuka. “Risuka the Witch-hunter, passing judgment on all who use magic outside, right?”

“Magicians cannot be judged by the law—they can be judged only by magic. Stands to reason,” Risuka said, stepping forward. “But what to hear I am interested in is who told you that?”

“Gosh ... Ha!”

Takamine suddenly roared, raising his hands toward the ceiling. Instantly, the room transformed. The white walls, floor, and ceiling, even the windows—in all directions, Magic Formulas appeared. Since Risuka had not made them visible, they were not red but colorless, transparent, like air, like wind given shape. I looked at Takamine—he had a crazy sort of smile on his face. A crazy smile I had seen before. I was, belatedly, certain that he was the killer, the man who had cast that spell. Those who used magic in their villainy always, without exception, smiled just like this.

“Magic ... Formulas!” Risuka wailed, angry at herself for overlooking them. Shaken badly, her attempt at sounding grown-up crumbled. “He was waiting for us! That’s why you put yourself in hospital, bastard! Try to trick me by pretending you were broken! How dare you!”

“Yeah, I’m broken all right... but you give me a week, and I can do the job just fine. Take this, Red Witch of Time!” Takamine lowered his hands, focusing his palms on Risuka. “Maginagii Maginakii Ekiiraton Komutan Komiitan!”

“Ha, you’re too slow!”

The moment he began chanting, Risuka whipped out the utility knife, pushed out the blade, and threw herself at him. Yes, this was the greatest weakness of every magician—the weakness none of them could avoid. When they were chanting their spell, they were completely defenseless. They were not gods, not devils, and they could not avoid the requisite chant. Using the same magic, a high-level magician would be able to chant less than a low-

level one and perhaps make that chant time almost zero—but never actually zero. If you genuinely wanted to use magic safely, you would work in teams or, like Risuka, fill your body with nearly flawless Magic Formula. This room was not that small, and covering it in Magic Formulas ... was not enough to cancel out the need to chant. He was not summoning a vacuum onto unmoving tracks but onto a moving target, and to lock onto her would take several seconds—by which time Risuka's knife would be in Takamine's throat.

“...Mm?”

There was a clank, and Risuka fell forward, spinning.

“... Uh, hey! No!”

“Ah!”

I saw her eyes look at me, pleading for help. And realized that our wrists were still stabilized—locked together by the handcuffs. No matter how fast she moved, if I stood stockstill, she could move only the length of our arms. Ah! Such a stupid way to ...

“... Maginagimu Teeemu!” He finished chanting.

“Urn, sorry.”

I do not know if she heard me. The moment Takamine's chant finished, kamaitachi came from all directions—from the walls, ceilings, floor, and windows—and cut Risuka to pieces. Hacked, slashed, chopped, and shredded. Her arm flew off, the severed arm split in half, and the pieces were cut in half again. Her leg flew off, the severed leg split in half, and the pieces were cut in half again. Her head flew off, the severed head split in half, and the pieces were cut in half again.

Risuka was pulped before my eyes, as if she'd been tossed into a blender, unrecognizable instantly. There was no shape left to her at all. No shape, no shadow, nothing of the sort. Only the pointy hat—too big for her, it had flown off at the first impact and escaped damage. It drifted down to the floor. The handcuffs hung limply from my wrist, no longer stabilizing anything.

[illegible]

now... but I underestimated you. It is impressive. Only thing is, there's not enough of it to really be worth calling violent."

He was bewildered.

"What I'm looking for is real violence, on the level of a nuclear bomb. Not the violence of a train that can kill four people, not the violence of the wind you used to kill a little girl—you'd have to be able to kill at least a few million, or you just don't count. Magic really is so useless. Go bend a spoon or something." Feeling Risuka's blood on my skin, I gazed at the red all around. "But little and often fills the purse—even magic like yours, I can use. Takamine Koutarou, become my pawn. I shall give your life purpose—and not a pathetic purpose, such as hitting people with a train. Something worth trading your life for; a rich, fulfilling purpose."

"Wh-wh-wh..

"It seems you'll do anything for your goals, even sacrifice your own life—which earns you a place among my minions. Your power is not worth losing at a moment like this—it seems like a waste. You have power but no idea how to use it—which is exactly why I offer to make you my slave. You will expend yourself for me. Obey me."

"F-f-f-fuck off!" Takamine shrieked. "Wh-who do you think you are? You should fear me! I am a magician! You will not use me!"

"Oh, but I will. Using magicians is what I do," I said, taking a step back, folding my arms, and leaning against the wall. Given what was about to happen, it was safer for me against the wall. "I decided that much when I met Risuka. They call themselves magicians, but none of them can use their powers properly. Might as well be human. Useless humans, useless magicians, all the same. Out of sheer pity, I offer to use them. If I do not, who will?"

"N-no child ... no human thinks like that!"

"Of course they do. I am a child, and I am a human! I will ask you one more time, Takamine. This is your last chance, Takamine Koutarou. Let me make you happy."

"No. With every bone in my body, no! I'm gonna cut you into pieces, you cocky little shit! Maginagii Magi—"

But there, at last, Takamine could not help but notice something amiss. Risuka's red blood, dripping from the ceiling, the walls, the windows, pooling on the floor. The sheer quantity of it: There was far, far more blood on the floor than could fit inside one tiny little girl. The blood on the floor, that red, red blood, was lapping against my ankles now. Fresh blood staining my white

socks and sneakers. The blood dripping from the ceiling was like rain. Drip, drip, drip, drip, drip ... drip drip drip drip drip.

“Wh-wh-what the ... ?”

“Such a shame. My heart fills with regret and a touch of resignation. I was sure your magic would make a good replacement fan. An environmentally sound one, no less... but I guess I’ll have to make do with the air conditioner,” I said, and done with gloating, I handed over the spotlight. “Do what you like with him, Mizukura Risuka.”

“UNDERSTOOD.”

Her voice echoed. The blood on the floor was up to my knees. I was wearing shorts, so I could feel Risuka’s blood lapping against my bare skin. It was warm and sticky, seemed to cling to me, to brush against me, a deep sea of Risuka’s red blood. All the blood in the room slithered toward the sea of blood, moving with a will of its own. Drip, drip, drip, drip. Diving down like suicide, scrabbling together like insects, collecting together in an orderly fashion.

“Wh-what’s going on!? Sh-she’s dead! I killed her!”

“But she is Mizukura Risuka! She is my pawn, the one pawn I can’t begin to handle,” I said, not even unfolding my arms. “No matter how hard it blows, no wind can split the water. Water blown upon remains water—it comes back together, and the ripples will die down. And Mizukura Risuka is Mizukura Shingo’s daughter. The legendary wizard they called a god, a devil—Nyarlathep, the most powerful magician who has ever lived. And she is the embodiment of his Magic Formula. Like some diabolical joke! How could she die from being cut to pieces!? A pathetic loser like you might just be able to ruffle my Risuka, but she is not the kind of witch you could ever hope to destroy!”

“EXACTLY.”

Again, her voice echoed out of the sea of blood. It boiled, rippled, churned.

“NØNK1RÎ NØNKÎRÎ MÄGONÄÄDØ RØÎKÎSÛRØÎKtSØRØÎ
KÎSHÎGÄÄROKÎSHÎGÄÄZÛ NØNKÎRÎ NØNKÎRÎ MÄGONÄÄDØ
RØÎKÎSØRØÎKÎSÛRØÎ KÎSHÎGÄÄRÛKÎSHÎGÄÄZÛ MÄROSÄKORÛ
MÄRÛSÄKØR1 KÄÎGÎRÎNÄ RÛ RÎØCHÎRÎØCHÎ RÎSØNÄ RØÎTØ RØÎTØ MÄÎTØ
KÄNÄGÛÎRÛ KÄGÄKÄKÎ KÎKÄGÄKÄ NYÄMÄMÄ NYÄMØNÄGÎ DØ1KÄÎKØ
DØÎKÄÎKÛ MÄÎROZO MÄÎRÛSÛ NYÄMØMO NYÄMØMÈ...”

“NYÄRÛRÄ!”

The chant seemed to last forever, but the moment it finished, a woman's arm rose up out of the sea of blood. The blood came up to my knees—not deep enough to cover someone, but that did not matter. No mere common sense could apply to this. The hand began feeling around, looking for the hat floating on the surface of the blood. It found it, and ... she rose up out of the blood. As she did, all the blood rushed toward her, like the tide going out, the level dropping quickly. Of course, her body was forming from that blood. The blood itself, the Magic Formula carved into that blood, was Mizukura Risuka.

“HA.HA-HA!”

Risuka laughed. A laugh of birth. She did not cry when born, not like mere mortals—as Risuka was born, she laughed. She was no longer the ten-year-old child she had been before. She was seventeen years older—twenty-seven years old. She was tall, slender, and supple like a wildcat— and very beautiful. Red hair, red cape, with a pointy sort of belt, gloves, and showing a lot of skin. Her eyes were red like fire; her lips glistened. The only things that remained unchanged were the utility knife in her hand and the red pointy hat. But the hat... fit perfectly.

“... Hello, Risuka,” I murmured. Murmured with a trace of reluctance, a tinge of regret. This—this was the greatest reason why Risuka was a bit beyond me. Risuka's father, Mizukura Shingo, had placed a procedure in Risuka's blood: If she lost more than a certain amount of blood—if she were ever about to die from loss of blood—it would trigger automatically. A Magic Sigil triggered by Risuka's death. Mizukura Shingo had placed a Magic Sigil inside the blood he'd already covered in Magic Formulas. And the magic that automatically triggered when that condition was met—you could call it a kind of safety valve. Mizukura Risuka's subjective time would leap forward seventeen years—omitting 6,205 days. A Magic Sigil some 620 times as strong as the present-day Risuka's full power. A Magic Sigil formed, against all sense, of Magic Formulas. A magic completely impossible for ten-year-old Risuka—but something easy enough for Mizukura Shingo, Nyarlathotep himself. No matter how much blood Mizukura Risuka lost, she would always be reborn, never die. Whether this was protection in the name of fatherly love or egoism in the name of his ambition, I could not say... only ...

“HA-HA-HA-HA-HA ... AH HA-HA-HA! GOOOD

MORNING!... MM? WHAT'S WRONG WITH MY VOICE?” Risuka shoved her long fingers into her mouth. “WHERE'S THE REST OF MY TONGUE!? HUNH ... MUST HAVE USED TOO MUCH BLOOD IN KID MODE, JUMPING TWO PEOPLE THROUGH TIME ... RIGHT, KIZUTAKA?”

“What?”

“GIVE ME YOUR LEFT THUMB.”

Even as she spoke, she swung the utility knife. She was several meters away, but that did not matter; my left thumb was neatly severed at the root.

“Mm ...” It did not hurt, but no matter how many times bits of my body were cut off, I would never get used to it—it remained decidedly unpleasant. The handcuffs slid off my wrist. I clasped my right hand over the cut, stopping the bleeding, and kicked the thumb over to Risuka. “There.”

“THANKS ...she said, picking it up and raising it to her lips. Blood dripped out of it, landing in her mouth. She sucked every last drop out of it and swallowed. When it stopped bleeding, she popped the thumb into her mouth, chewed it a few times till only the bone remained, and then stuck out her tongue proudly. “Finished! The perfect Risuka! So cool! So beautifully red! Ta-dah!”

Takamine stared at her, stunned. He really was good for nothing. Had he really thought there was nothing more to the Red Witch of Time? That’s just too sad for words. A pathetic insect, capable only of perceiving the world according to your convenience. I could have dealt with your pathetic magic, incapable of even blowing out a fire, all on my own. The Wind magic was a waste ... but there was nothing worse than a pawn that had no use.

“Let me warn you—in this form, Risuka doesn’t beat around the bush. I have no idea what happened to her, but seventeen years from now, Risuka has developed a very aggressive personality. No matter how much we change the future, that much is always the same. As if it’s an innate trait that memories and thoughts have no bearing on—resulting from the physical construction of her mind and the chemicals in her brain. In that sense, physical and mental are much the same thing.”

“A most accurate warning, Kizutaka,” Risuka said, stepping forward. “And what will you do now that you’ve been warned, Wind Master?”

“Maginagii Maginakii Ekiiraton Komiitan Komiitan ...,” Takamine quickly began chanting. There were no more handcuffs to get in her way, and she could have ended it instantly by attacking while he chanted—but Risuka did no such thing. She walked slowly, unhurriedly toward his bed. “... Maginamu Maginagimii Teeemii!”

He finished chanting. Vacuum blades flew from all directions, and once again the blades sliced through Risuka’s body... but where they cut, her body turned to liquid and immediately returned to its original form. No matter how many blades cut through her, she remained intact.

“Wh-wh-wh...”

“Kizutaka ... explain?”

“... Ten-year-old Risuka can only advance time—jumping forward through it or omitting chunks of it,” I said, still clutching my bleeding hand. “But the twenty-seven-year-old version is fundamentally different. Her flesh and blood have matured considerably in the last seventeen years: She can stop her own time as easily as taking candy from a baby.”

And once her time had stopped, it was absolutely impossible for her to die, no matter what. She could not be injured, she could not be harmed. By anything. That was what it meant to stop your own time absolutely—the absence of change. Time, time, time, time, time, time.

“Th-that’s...” Takamine said, his panic reaching its peak. “One more time! Maginagii Magina ...”

“Didn’t I tell you you’re a pathetic good-for-nothing sluglike unbelievably unbearably slow half-wit!? Chant in binary, why don’t you, you useless piece of historically insignificant trash! I’ll reduce you to component atoms by the thirtysecond hexadecimal byte!” She vaulted toward him and slammed Takamine’s aging flesh against the bed, her right fist slamming into his heart and holding him down by brute force. She might be grown-up now, but he was a man. Nevertheless, she did this easily. She held up the utility knife in her left hand. “Ha-ha-haaaaaaah! Look at all the scribbles you left on the wall, crazy man! You know what I call this? Wasted fricking effort!”

“Augh ... augh ... augh ...” Takamine groaned, trying to fight back, but his legs and arms would not move, as if held down by invisible chains.

“Aaaaaagggggghhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

“Listen close, and remember well, you pathetic little man! Genius equals 100 percent talent—no effort at all! Effort is for scrabbling little worms like you, a futile endeavor you waste your whole sad lives on!”

Schk schk schk schk schk schk schk ... Risuka began sliding the blade of the knife in and out, in and out.

“Time for the witch’s trial! I will pass judgment on you! Two choices—live ... or die!”

“Aaaauugggghhhhh! ”

“Who was the raging moron who taught magic to a defective loser like you? Answer truthfully, and I will spare your life ... though you will never be able to use magic again.”

“Wh-why?”

“Mm? What do you mean, ‘Why’?”

“Wh-why do you... do like this? Judge magicians who use magic outside? I... aren’t we the same?”

“How dare you even suggest a worm like you has anything to do with a goddess like me! There is a limit to how rude I shall allow even a man as ignorant as you to be! Still... Well, I suppose ... I am trying to find my father, but...” Risuka looked at me and flashed me a sardonic smile. I said nothing. “I kill you all to stop your damaging the reputations of the rest of us. Outside humans seem to have a bit of a hard time understanding this stuff, but if a scumbag like you gets taken for a typical magician, and people start thinking all magicians are like you? That would suck. You’ve got to throw the bad apples out. If people start to think magicians are dangerous, that means trouble for all of us. Right now they’ve just got us locked behind the Gate, but if it got down to it, they wouldn’t hesitate to nuke Nagasaki.

“And we really, really, really don’t want to be nuked again. That’s why basket cases like you and the kind of half-wit magician who would teach a loser like you magic cannot be tolerated. If we want everyone to believe that wizards and witches are harmless, helpful, and adorable, then defects like you can’t be allowed to exist.”

“Th-that’s ... that’s it?”

“See? I was nice enough to answer your question. Now you’d better level with me. What was the name of the man who taught you magic?”

The blade of her knife gleamed. Risuka said nothing more, just stared down at him. Takamine hesitated for a few more seconds, but at last he answered ... with that same crazy smile.

“Eat shit, bitch.”

“Good answer, scumbag!”

She spun the utility knife and stabbed it down through her hand, into Takamine’s heart. He grunted, but this was only the beginning of his nightmare. Risuka’s right hand was linked to Takamine’s heart by the flowing blood and stabilized via the utility knife. And thus, the rest of Takamine’s life began. It began in an instant... the beginning of his end.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh!”

It was like a video fast-forwarding: Takamine’s body began to wither away, faster and faster. He was through old age in no time, quickly becoming a sort of mummy. His skin dried; his eyes lost moisture, turning cloudy; veins throbbed against his skin—his hair went white and then fell out. Takamine

was experiencing decades in a single instant. Without a second's thought for compatibility. Meanwhile, Risuka herself remained twenty-seven. At twenty-seven, Risuka had taken advantage of her pattern, Time, and obtained the ability not only to stop—but to remain unchanged. No matter how far she advanced through time, Risuka herself did not change at all. By almost any standard, that meant immortality—immortality without growing old. Destiny Interference, carried to its logical extreme, was just that high-level a field. Risuka no longer controlled time—she was time. “Ha, ha-ha, ha-ha-ha-ha-haaaah!” Screaming her laughter, she stole his time, as if her blood were sucking it in.

“You always do like to fight flashy.” I sighed, watching the terrifying time storm. “But I guess that’s what makes you a witch, daughter of the god devil.”

Risuka had said geniuses were 100 percent talent, but I did not agree. Genius meant 1 percent talent and 99 percent wasted effort. In that sense, Risuka was absolutely a genius. And I did not need to be. All I ever needed was 1 percent inspiration.

“I...,” Takamine said, racked with the pain only someone well past death’s door could ever endure. Shame long since forgotten, he begged for his life, screaming, “I don’t wanna die, I don’t wanna die, I don’t wanna die, I don’t wanna die...!”

“Shut up,” Risuka said, and took her right hand off his chest, only to punch him with it. Takamine’s dry, mummified body—shattered. Into tiny fragments. The air filled with shiny bits of Takamine Koutarou. “Diamond dust,” Risuka said, snapping her fingers.

Instantly, all the bits of him in the air, and the pile of hair on the bed, vanished. Removed from the space-time continuum.

“Dude had some balls for a loser.”

“I’m sure you haven’t forgotten,” I said, interrupting her as she gloated. Risuka at ten was one thing; the twenty-seven-year-old version was a bit more difficult—a bit beyond me. She was truly a monster—not a pawn I could even begin to use. Pawns that were too powerful could occasionally hold you back. In that sense, Risuka was as big a problem for me as her father. “Risuka, I would definitely like my thumb back.”

“... Oh, sorry, sorry.”

She grinned, moved over to me, and, in a hideously nonchalant gesture, snapped her own left thumb right off. Blood spurted out of it, but that blood was instantly stopped and returned to her body. Risuka put her thumb against the wound on my left hand. The blood mingled, and for a long moment, the

thumb twitched like a thing possessed, but at last it calmed down. I tried moving it. Rock, paper, scissors. Rock, paper, scissors. Fox, rabbit, dog. It was an adult woman's size, so it looked a little odd, but since it was made of a shapeless liquid originally, it would soon resize itself to fit my hand.

"Thank you."

"Not at all. I should be thanking you."

"But if you were going to kill him anyway, you might as well have stolen his tongue."

"Kizutaka's blood tastes better. Very, very compatible. I could have drained that loser of his blood and not grown as much as a fingernail. Let's face it, your blood is just perfect for me," Risuka said, her red lips twisting into a smile. "But it looks like we both wasted our time here. I got no clues to my father's whereabouts, and you did not acquire a new pawn."

"Not entirely wasted. We have eliminated a dead end— and in that sense alone, this was productive."

"Aha. I see. You do have a clever mind. But it has been awhile since I met you in this form."

"Yes, it has, Risuka."

"Would you like a kiss?"

"Pfft. No thanks. Wait till I'm grown up."

"You're no fun. Either way, looks like my time's up."

Risuka began to melt, her time crumbling away. One minute—that was how long Risuka could remain twentyseven years old, the only limit on her presence in this time. A necessary limit built into the Magic Formula-Magic Sigil, that impossibly high-level magic.

"See you again."

"Probably."

Risuka winked at me ... and time moved backward, something that was normally impossible. Her flesh melted, her form turning liquid, everything crumpling faster, faster, until all that remained ...

★★★

“Still... I mean, it makes sense that the train driver was the killer ... but how did you know, Risuka? I can see how the front of the train would be the best place to be, but how does that prove he wasn’t actually on the second platform?”

“Mm?” Risuka said. “Mm ... Good point.”

She had exhausted her magic and been unable to jump home from the police hospital. She had sneaked out of the hospital with me and headed for the nearest station. A station on the same line as New Kizuna Station. Risuka was ten years old again. Not just returned to normal—but ten in the absolute sense. Other than the hat and knife, there was no sign she had ever been twenty-seven. The hat was too big for her again. Time had been canceled. Knowing how beautiful she would be in seventeen years did factor into my thoughts a little, but... it did not really matter. The Mizukura Risuka walking next to me, her handcuffs clanking, was the same person as the Red Witch of Time, the all-powerful, domineering queen. I felt more than a little sympathy for Risuka, faced with the task of developing her powers to that level in seventeen more years, but... that also did not matter. We had eliminated one waste of time—that had been the meaning in our work today. The only way to pare down options was to investigate them all, one by one. The Wind Master—a pawn I would not have objected to possessing, but since the man with that power was such a pathetic individual, it would have been useless. The only remaining problem was who, exactly, had taught Takamine magic, but... while we had no proof, Takamine had known the nickname “Red Witch of Time” and had been drawing formulas all over his hospital room, preparing for her arrival, which suggested ... But even if it did, would Mizukura Shingo really do something like that? Would he really teach magic to a human who could never hope to master it? Was he aware that his daughter was chasing him? If he was, then—

“The train schedule.”

“Mm?”

Heedless of my worries, Risuka was answering the question I had asked—a question I had asked without much interest. What had she said? The train schedule?

“The train schedule Kizutaka gave me. The xerox. The key to everything was that, really.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Er, um ... If I tell you, Kizutaka may be angry. Or perhaps just depressed.”

“Me? What do you mean?”

“This is proof, not theory. Today is Sunday, also the right time. Let us go see.”

“Go? Where?”

“New Kizuna Station.”

I didn’t understand, but I followed her lead. We went to the nearest station and rode away from home, back to New Kizuna Station. We got off on the second platform. Risuka stood in the best position—not counting the driver’s seat. “Here, yes?” she said, checking. I nodded.

“Kizutaka...”

“Mm?”

“I don’t want to grow up.”

“Hunh? Where’d that come from?”

“If I am grown-up, everything is boring. I don’t mean Takamine only—there are boring grown-ups everywhere ... even my father ...”

“But if you grow up, you gain power.”

She did not answer.

“True for you, true for me. Things we can’t do now, we will be able to do when we’re grown-up.”

“I still do not want to grow up.”

“... I guess I understand,” I said, nodding. Risuka’s personality in seventeen years—aggressive, heedless of her surroundings, self-righteous. But that was only symbolic. Everyone ended up like that, more or less. Risuka knew that better than anyone and had been left hating the idea of her own magic maturing. “But I want power. Power that will let me control everything. If they are fools, possibly so foolish they have no right to live—then they must be controlled by someone like me, and to do that, I need absolute power.”

“A difference of opinion, then,” Risuka said. “I knew the driver was the killer by the process of elimination. To activate the Magic Formula, the killer had to have been nearby—but there were too many problems with the first platform, and the second platform was also no good. That naturally led to the answer.”

“No, wait—we haven’t ruled out the second platform yet, have we?”

“It was simply impossible,” Risuka said, sliding the blade of her utility knife in and out. Schk schk schk schk... schk schk schk schk ... “Now is ... 6:20. The train will come in twelve minutes. Today is Sunday, so the schedule is the same.”

“Just say it already.”

“Kizutaka, go to the first platform and stand there,” she said, pointing at the door marker directly across the tracks from us. “Tell me if you can see me from there.”

.. All right.”

I did as she said; up the stairs, down the stairs, and over to the first platform. I stood at the edge of it, looking across the four rails, looking for Risuka. Her red form was easy to make out. Red was the one color that could be picked out easily at just about any distance. That was why police cars flashed red. By the same logic, I instantly saw Risuka standing across from me. This was the spot; this was where I had seen the accident happen.

“Um... Risuka?” I called out, but at that volume, it would not reach the other side. “Risuka!?”

She waved. She’d seen me. Her eyes were not very good, so at this distance she would never have seen me if I hadn’t shouted. And I was not wearing red clothes. So ... what? Did she mean the second platform was too far away for the killer to see? But it didn’t matter what we knew about Takamine Koutarou; at the time, we had only been looking for an unidentified killer, and we had no idea if he had good eyes or not. Or was there some statistical likelihood suggesting that the use of magic damaged vision?

“Hey! Kizutaka!” Risuka shouted. “Today was very fun!”

... I guess so.

“Eh? I can’t hear! I can’t hear Kizutaka’s voice!”

“I guess!” I yelled back. The platform was much more crowded than it had been at noon. I was a bit embarrassed, but they probably just assumed I was a dumb kid. I saw no reason to care if lower life-forms incapable of thought were looking at me. Whatever opinions of me they might form did not matter. None of them had any ability to evaluate. They would all die, clinging to common sense. “I said, I guess it was fun!”

“Maybe tomorrow will be more fun!”

“I’m sure it will!” I shouted confidently. “I’ll make sure it’s even more thrilling! I promise I’ll make your life worth living! I’ll find your dad eventually! I’ll even get rid of the Gate to Nagasaki someday, so ...!”

So for a little while longer, I need you to remain my pawn. Doesn’t matter if you’re too much for me to handle or not, right now, I need you, Risuka. But before I could say any of that, Risuka grinned.

“So let’s be friends forever!”

While I was still left speechless, the PA system crackled to life. “Train approaching platform 2.” The customary announcement I’d heard a thousand times. I tried to shout some objection or perhaps an excuse back at Risuka, but no matter how loud I was, she could never have heard me over the announcement. Hmm ... oh well. She could think what she liked. Whether she thought I was her pawn or something else was up to her. As long as I knew she was my pawn—as long as I was sure of that, then I could make use of her. The longer I stayed with Risuka, the more useful people I would meet, whether they be magicians or not. That was what mattered—she could think whatever she liked. I would generously allow her that freedom. Then: “Train approaching platform 1.” The same announcement echoing over the top of the first one, like a round, but this time it was on my side of the station—a round? Oh, oh! “Please ...” “Please ...” “Remain behind .. .” “Remain behind .. .” “The yellow lines.” “The yellow lines.” The same round as the day of the accident! I looked at my watch: 6:32!

“Risuka!” I looked up, looking for her—but I could no longer see her. The train had already entered the station and was slowing down to stop at the second platform. Its body was a wall, and I could not make out Risuka’s red shape through it.

“... Ah, ahh ...!”

A moment later, the train pulled up to the first platform. It was coming from the opposite direction, and at this end of the station—even if the trains had the same time on the schedule, it would reach me a little later. That explained it—indeed, it was impossible to witness that truth from the second platform. The front of the train passed in front of me. I felt absolutely no desire to jump in front of it. I would never do something like that. A moment later, the round began again. “Train leaving ...” “Train leaving ...” “From platform 2 ..” “From platform 1 ..” The train on the other side moved first. I was at the front of the line but did not get on the train, so the fools behind me moved around me, climbing aboard. The doors closed, and the train pulled out, kachunk, ka-chunk, ka-chunk.

“Risuka!” I shouted again ... but there was no one on the platform across from me. It was empty, as if she had skipped away through time. The

people who had just gotten off the train glanced in my direction, surprised by the strange name, but soon went back to their own time. Feeling as if I'd been tricked, I scratched my head. Should I be angry? Or depressed? A little of both—even if four people had been pulped by a train right in front of me, I should not have forgotten the other train. Perhaps I had been a little excited, wondering if this case involved magic. Or perhaps worried that someone would suspect me. No, those were just excuses. From now on, I would have to pay attention to inorganic things as much as I did people. A perfect opportunity to get better at using them as well. With that in mind, I looked down at my left hand. Only a few hours had passed, and the new thumb was still a bit funny looking. I felt as if it were sneering up at me.

Naturally.

More than half my body was made from Risuka.

Subway accident is Q.E.D.

Episode Two: Let There Be Light Where There is Shadow.

“Kagetani Hebiyuki, that person is our criminal.”

Mizukura Risuka does not like dry food. That, however, is a matter of her constitution, and not personal preference. (From what I have been told, Risuka can survive an entire year on water alone, but without it, she probably wouldn't even last two days). Anyhow, she always frowns at the sight of dry sweets, and when I served rice crackers to her at my house the other day, she drizzled them in water before eating. (She did say that the moistened rice crackers were extremely delicious). She enjoys sweets like mizuyokan (sweet bean jelly), and fruits like watermelons and grapes are her favourites. And that's why Mizukura Risuka's manservant, Chamberlain, prepared a banana mousse for us at three o'clock. Risuka added loads of sugar into the coffee that was readied for us, and, after taking a heavy sip, she repeated;

“Kagetani Hebiyuki”

“The name of that magician is quite well known throughout Nagasaki. It's rare to find anyone living in the Kingdom of Magic who is unaware of his existence. ‘The Kingdom of Shadow’, ‘Swine Singer’, ‘The Circle of the Eagled Swine’, ‘The Red Pig Gentleman’, and ‘The Genius of Malice’; these are five titles held by the mysterious man in the Red Jacket. In the Kingdom of Magic, the number of titles one possesses is directly equivalent to their authority and indicates the extent of magical power held by the person. I explained this to you in the beginning, didn't I? The only title I hold is ‘The Red Witch of Time’. Only from this, we can get a proper idea about how dreadfully amazing Kagetani Hebiyuki actually is. To begin with, I'm a witch of Destiny Interference, so it's just sort of a title I've inherited.”

“Hmmm.....titles, right? Just by possessing a single title, you're already a person that has exceeded limitations. And if you had five of those titles...? You would naturally be five times as powerful as Risuka.”

“It's not just a matter of being multiplied by five. It's more than that.”

“That seems like kind of an exaggeration, don't you think?... Which reminds me, your dad had a lot of titles too, right? ...Something like ‘Nyarlathotep’ or whatever. I suppose he must have a few dozen of those?”

“My father was the holder of six hundred and sixty-five titles”.

It was an order of magnitude different. The image is daunting.

“Actually, it was six hundred and sixty-six, but I inherited one of those titles. And that's why it's now six hundred and sixty-five.”

“You inherited ‘The Red Witch of Time’ from him, right? ‘Witch’... don’t tell me, your dad wasn’t a man?”

“When you're an existence as powerful as my father, gender doesn't matter anymore.”

Risuka said that with an embarrassed grin. The more I hear about her father, the more outrageous he seems.

“Well, for the time being, I guess that’s enough about your father... but still, to possess five titles--”

I ruminate over the five titles told by Risuka. "The Kingdom of Shadow", "Swine Singer", "The Circle of the Eagled Swine", "The Red Pig Gentleman", "The Genius of Malice”.

“There are a lot of pig related ones, but why? Are pigs considered to be some kind of sacred beasts? I thought that it was a genre of black cats and crows. Or at least lizards or bats.”

“No. Pigs are pigs. They are just food.”

“Food?”

“Delicious”

“Delicious?”

"But," Risuka speaks, while fumbling with the mousse in her mouth. Her manners are slightly bad.

“I've only recently noticed this, and I'm not the only one who has, but that's one word which seems to be used differently outside Nagasaki, compared to on the inside.”

“Uh huh?”

“Within the prefecture, the word 'pig' is a kind of honorary title for people. That’s not the case in other prefectures, right?”

“Yeah...well, It's not a very good word to call someone”

In my personal opinion, it's a term harsher than "stupid" or "idiot", but I think it's even harsher for the person being called that. With an indication of being a sleazebag, a lowlife, it's a term commonly used for abusing fat people. Although, if you think about it, there doesn't seem to be much of a connection between being a lowlife and obesity. In the first place, if pigs weren't raised by humans, they wouldn't be so fat.

“But, that doesn't mean it's a noble title in the Nagasaki Prefecture, right? A title of honor is, well, it'd be kind of a big deal, I mean.”

“It's a compliment”

“It's a compliment, huh?”

“'Mainly for guys. I think it means 'cool' and 'stylish', if you want to translate it.”

“Hmmm... so it's not just a language gap in terms of its nuances. It's more like a different understanding of the same entity.”

“Yes.” Risuka nodded. “In the Nagasaki Prefecture, that kind of man is considered popular.”

“So it's a cultural difference... in ancient Japan, an oval-shaped face was considered beautiful. It must be that kind of thing.”

So for the time being, I decided to accept that line of thinking without trying to question it further, and I just decided to ask the question that popped up in my mind.

“So, does that mean you are into those types of men?”

“Hmm...not really. I don't really have a thing for those. I am not one of those fangirls, after all.” Saying this, Risuka pointed at the mousse-filled plate with her spoon. “Now now Kizutaka, you should finish that soon.”

“Oh.”

“You need more sugar in your coffee. Come on, come on! No need to feel shy.”

“I would rather not”, saying that I drank black coffee. When it properly cooled down, I drank about half of the cup in one go. Bitter. I'm sorry to Chamberlain for saying this, but although the coffee is good, this isn't the

kind of stuff you should be serving to children. "And, unlike you, Risuka, I don't like the soggy stuff, so you can have my share of the mousse. Back to the topic at hand. So, that man... Kagetani---Hebiyuki, was it? The one who possesses the title of 'Kingdom of Shadows', that man is the culprit behind this case? How can you be so certain? I mean, we're talking about a celebrity here, you wouldn't normally expect one of them to get entangled in your life. Or are you saying that it's not that unusual of an occurrence to happen for you?"

"Nn, it is unusual..... but, as far as the special characteristics are concerned, he's all I can think of. After all, using magic without even having to cast spells? There aren't many magicians with that kind of magical power, not even in the Kingdom of Magic... but, that makes things a little more troublesome for me."

"What do you mean by 'troublesome'?"

"I mean, well, he's too strong for us to oppose him."

Risuka hadn't said something so discouraging since quite a long time, so I was naturally a bit surprised. But she seemed dead serious about it.

This means that the man named Kagetani, that magician - from the way Risuka spoke about him, he's not just a mere human-turned-magic-user, he's probably on the side of born-magic-users. Does it go on to imply that his magical prowess far surpasses that of Risuka's?

"Hey Risuka, does that mean..."

"Ah, sorry, but that will have to wait," Risuka said, reaching out and grabbing the remote control for the television near her.

"Sumo Wrestling match is about to begin"

"....."

"I can't wait for them to come to Kyushu."

Risuka then proceeded to stare at the TV screen intently, as if intoxicated. I sigh in sorrow at this unexpected discovery.. From our conversations so far, she didn't even seem like the kind of person to be interested in sword fighting. So, when I saw her staring at the sumo wrestlers with a slight smile on her face.... my impression of her flipped 180 degrees. She seems to be enjoying herself even more than when she copies off from the Grimoires. I always thought of her as a little girl with few interests, but turns out she was quite worldly in nature. I didn't expect her to have such an

ordinary side, but... it seems that I need to change my perception of Mizukura Risuka a bit. "Good grief," shaking my head, I decided to retrace the development of the story so far, trying to sort out the ins and outs of the whole situation.



I declare in advance that I am not trying to imitate Risuka's tone of voice, but speaking of Ariga Orie; she's a well-known figure in the elementary school that Risuka and I go to. At least among my classmates, the fifth grade students, everyone knows her as a celebrity. In a more secular way, she is a typical "talented woman". We've only had a brief span of contact back in the third grade, when we were in the same class, but since I was the chairman of the committee and she was the vice-chairwoman, we did manage to have some rushed conversations. And even after we were separated in the fourth grade, if I met her in the corridor or somewhere else, we would still exchange light greetings. That was the extent of our acquaintance. The school is a collection of low-energy groups, but she is one of the few people who inspires meaning, so I still maintain a certain degree of friendship with her. She's just a child as of now, but I think that, if she grows up, she may be able to function as an effective "piece" for me, the female student named Ariga Orie.

"What you want to do in the future, Kugi-kun?"

"...In the future, huh?"

"I want everyone to live happily in the future."

"Happily, huh. What is happiness?"

"It's just whatever makes people feel happy."

The blue talk we had that day left quite the lasting impression on me. Of course, it was easy to understand that she didn't have a concrete vision of the future, but her line, "I want everyone to live happily in the future," was something that coincided with my ambitions, so the conversation was quite unforgettable, and it resonated with me, even if only slightly. It was the same year that Risuka transferred from Moriyashiki in Nagasaki Prefecture, but I didn't get to know her until the following year. At that time, I also didn't have a clear vision of my "future", so of course, I couldn't talk big in front of Orie. All in all, I'm not going to argue with the fact that she was quite the celebrity in our school, and I mean in the sense of "popularity". I am going to reiterate: amongst my classmates, Ariga Orie was the one with the most promising prospects; the highlight of our class. And—It was three days ago that the

highlight of our class, Ariga Orie, was kidnapped. Kidnapping—to get kidnapped. She was on her way back home from shopping with her sister, who is two years younger than her and a third year student. It was dusk... late evening, apparently. Under the moonlight, a ‘suspicious man’ appeared in front of the girls—and kidnapped Ariga Orie. Although safe, her little sister was terrified, having witnessed the entire incident. She was soon discovered, lying crestfallen at the side of the road, by the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, and the incident of the kidnapping was made public. The crime was considered a very serious social issue. In addition, since she had only just been taken, the neighbors quickly mobilized to launch a large search, hoping to recover the victim. The commotion, of course, reached me—and, at that point, I wasn’t particularly interested in the incident. Stories of children being kidnapped are fairly common, such things happen every day. Although it did feel a bit unnatural, because Ariga Orie didn't seem to be the kind of person who would be ‘carelessly’ kidnapped. But, since it was by force, and adults do have a physical advantage over children, it was just unavoidable. It was a pity that one of the ‘pieces’ that might have been useful to me in the future had been preemptively lost, but she hadn't grown up to that point yet, so there wasn't much to regret. And, if it's just an ordinary kidnapping, it's not something I can do anything about. That is the work of the Saga Prefectural Police, including my father. I have no intention of interfering with someone else's professional duties when I don't have to. But today, when I heard ‘a certain story’ at school, I had to abandon that course of action. Or rather, I had no choice but to throw it away. It was the testimony of Ariga Orie's sister, who was at the scene of the crime. My intelligence network has not yet expanded to the third grade, so the news reached me two days late. But it was a “strange” story nonetheless. It was about the actions of the “suspicious man”, and how the events unfolded at that time. The authenticity of the testimony is unclear, and it’s almost incomprehensible to a point, so I tried using the Whatever-I-Could-Understand-From-This Method, and inferred the following information:

As Ariga Orie and her sister were walking home together, a cutely shaped car appeared just in front of them from the corner (according to another source, it was a yellow Volkswagen). The driver's seat door opened and a ‘suspicious-looking man’ came out. As soon as that ‘suspicious-looking man’ appeared, Ariga Orie and her sister couldn't move, as if they were ‘tied up with ropes’. The suspicious man seemed to move his arm a little, but that was the extent of it. It wasn’t that the sisters were drugged or anything- but it was just like “paralysis”. She said that she couldn't even shake with fear. Not on the level of being frozen from nervousness or terror, it was as if her entire body was petrified, and apparently it was the same for her sister. But strangely enough, she was able to speak, and her sister, Ariga Orie, mustering up the courage, asked the “suspicious man” - “What are you?”. It’s a question with no qualifications, but it doesn’t need to be

qualified here. The "suspicious man" - with an indecent smile (in the words of the little sister, the smile was 'extremely creepy') "I'm a bad, bad magician", he said. And with that, he hit the neck of Ariga Orié with his hand, knocking her out, he then tucked her away into the back seat of his car. Then he glanced at the little sister, who remained motionless, "Did you see my outfit clearly?" He said, "Personally, I'm very, very, very sorry to hear that, but I'm going to let you off the hook, so it would be a good thing for you to remember me very well.....". And with that, he got into the car and, leaving the little sister behind, he disappeared without a trace. Nothing else was left behind- nothing, nothing at all. No, to be accurate, there was indeed something "strange" that was found at the scene: Two arrows that one might use in a game of darts were left behind.

"--Besides, the outfit of the 'suspicious man' was really very 'strange'."

The man wore a red jacket that looked like a safety pin. His eyes were extremely fierce, and his physique was very strong, just like a "giant." "Giant"... Although this was indeed the opinion of a third grade girl, it did not mean it could be entirely disregarded. I checked up with my father. When I asked him about it, he said that her testimony was entirely ignored. As for the 'being unable to move' part, they just cited the reason to be 'muscle stiffness caused by extreme fear'. I'd heard that a portrait of the "suspicious man" has been made (which I hadn't been able to see yet. I tried asking father for help, but he wouldn't allow me to see it at this point). Apparently, the overall portrait was vague and ambiguous, which was natural, considering the fact that the witness was just a third-grader. Her testimony was being completely ignored and, although that was a rational decision from an adult point of view, I didn't think it was the right course of action. Thinking back to how I used to think and what I used to do back in the third grade, it is clear to me where the children's thinking ability is good. Well, I admit that you shouldn't measure other people by your own standards, but age is definitely not the benchmark for judging everything, that is the point I want to express. So during my lunch break today, I decided to directly meet up with Ariga Orié's sister and hear the story from her firsthand. And, although her manner of speaking was childish, I got the impression that she was, just like her sister, rather intelligent. So I decided that I could at least take her story with 50% credibility. But the key point is still the "red jacket like a safety pin." Basically, only the citizens of the "Kingdom of Magic" can dress up in such an incomprehensible way and wear such unimaginable costumes. That was my reason for visiting Risuka's house, a coffee shop modelled after a windmill.

"...Huh." After the sumo broadcast was over, Risuka finally noticed my existence again. There was a trace of satisfaction in her expression, as if she had just finished an important job, and her whole face was radiant.

"— Sorry to have kept you waiting, Kizutaka"

"Well, I wasn't expecting to be kept waiting for this, either." Speaking of which, it was the first time I'd visited Risuka's room in the evening during a sumo broadcast. It seemed that I didn't pick the correct time today. But it was ridiculous to blame myself for such a trivial matter, so I quickly dispelled the thought of introspection.

"So, I mean, I don't really have anything much to say about this. However, I want to know what kind of person Kagetani was."

"In a single phrase, he is a person that enjoys crime." Risuka said, turning towards me. "A notorious kidnapper specializing in little girls, who was something of a representative of urban legends in the Kingdom of Magic in Nagasaki. His pattern is Light, and his category is Object Manipulation... I think?"

"Object Manipulation...so something like telekinesis or psychokinesis? It's advanced, and its rank is reasonably high, but it's quite typical and common. It lacks heavily if we are talking about creativity. And In terms of rarity, your Time Manipulation ability seems to be far superior."

"It's rare, I agree. But if we are talking about the practicality and the extent of applications--- well, you know what I am talking about, right Kizutaka?"

"Hm..."

That's completely true. In the category of magic, being rare does not equate to being effective in action at all. Risuka's magic is a Destiny Interference type ability with a pattern of Water and a category of Time, and its role is to interfere with fate, but it can only manipulate her own time and cannot directly affect people and things outside herself. The ability, which has a great potential to change the future, however, can only be used by Risuka for treating her minor injuries. Compared to that, the rather commonplace and not-so-rare telekinetic system, that "Object Manipulation" - well, it goes without saying. Any useless person can arrive at that conclusion. In short, being rare isn't all that helpful. Just because you are unique does not mean that you are beneficial. Fundamental basic skills are still superior in terms of application, unlike skills of rarity whose applications are heavily limited. But of course, if something has both rarity and application, it will definitely be the strongest magic.

"A kidnapper who specializes in little girls. No doubt, this is all connected."

“That's not all. You told me before, there were two arrows left at the scene, right? Do you know what they were, Kizutaka?”

"I don't know. They have been taken away by the police, and are probably lying around in the evidence room by now! Is there anything wrong with the two arrows? Hmm... If they are magical items, like your utility knife...This is not good. Once they fall into the hands of a public power, it may not be easy to get them back."

“Well, I think there's no need for concern regarding that. There were two victims and two arrows, right? If that's the case, then by now, those are just ordinary arrows. Of course, that's based on the assumption the criminal is that 'Kingdom of Shadow', but that 'arrow' is a little different from my cutter knife.”

Risuka looks at the cutter holstered on her waist, and then tilts her head slightly. It seems that she is not sure how to explain it.

“My cutter knife is just a magical power amplification device, but... that 'arrow' is a Magic Sigil.”

“Magic Sigil?”

“Yeah. Although I haven't seen the actual thing for myself, so it could be a Magic Formula as well, but taking everything into consideration, it's probably a Magic Sigil”

Magic Sigils, Magic Formulas. There is no need to distinguish between them as concepts, but to put it in plain terms, a Magic Sigil is a 'trap' and a Magic Formula is a 'weapon'. Both of them are intended to eliminate the procedure for magicians to use their magic (i.e., omit the chanting of spells), and in principle, one could say that the Magic Sigil is superior to the Magic Formula, and ranked higher as well. A Magic Formula is only an aid to magic, and can only be activated when the magician is near, but a Magic Sigil doesn't have that limitation. It in itself is magical. But judging from the impression of the word 'arrow', it seems to be a 'weapon' rather than a 'trap'.

That 'arrow' is supposedly filled with magic letters. Magical characters. And since it's a Magic Sigil, if you satisfy the conditions and it activates, it reverts back to just a plain, ordinary arrow. The magic itself is gone, so the spell is automatically cancelled. Therefore, it's not much of a problem if the police retrieve it - that's not the case with a magic formula. And we are talking about Kagetani Hebiyuki here - in other words, he's the kind of person to not leave behind any evidence.

“Ah, I see. The sigil doesn't leave behind any traces”

"The 'Magic Sigil' carved into my blood consists of a 'Magic Formula' of its own, so it's a different story again... but... basically a 'Magic Sigil' can't be reused."

"It's really complicated. I understand, so since magic is involved, even if the evidence remains, the magical effect is already lost? It's shameful that I didn't realise such a simple fact until now. I should have understood the difference between the two a long time ago. I was just guessing based on intuition. I need to reflect on my carelessness."

"You haven't seen a Magic Sigil even once till now. No wonder you don't know how to distinguish between them. Moreover, you lack the ability to see Magic Sigils or Magic Formulas."

"Maybe... however, 'arrows', huh? I suppose that's one way to look at it. No one stipulates that traps must be arranged obediently somewhere. The 'arrow' itself is a 'trap' to be thrown. Speaking of which, the little sister had something to say about that guy moving his arms... I guess it was probably at that time when he threw those darts. But still, Risuka, what exactly is that 'activation condition'? For throwing an arrow, they... I don't know about Ariga, but her sister, by the looks of it, didn't seem to be injured in any way physically, let alone mentally."

"'He', you see... is a kidnapper who specializes in little girls, but he doesn't hurt their bodies. That is one of his rules."

"Like a gentleman, hm? Come to think of it, he was titled 'The Red Gentleman Pig', after all. A criminal who's also a gentleman.... God, that's a nasty combination."

"I completely agree. And as for the activation condition, the arrow must pierce the target's shadow."

"Pierce?"

"More like, stitch the shadow"

"Shadow Stitching?"

"He seems more like a ninja than a magician." Apparently, no spell is needed at all for activation, yet it affects them just the same. It's a simple matter. "Shadow Stitching--that seems just like bondage. The sheer simplicity of this all makes me amazed."

“It’s simplistic and also easy to use. That’s just the kind of magic it is. I have said that many times.”

“Just saying it once was sufficient. However, amongst the 'object manipulation' systems – telekinesis, that magic seems to be rather useless. It's just a matter of fixing the object in its place. Even if the person can't move, they're able to retain their consciousness," as I recall, according to the little sister's testimony, that man made Ariga Orie unconscious with just a hit to her neck. “And it's not like he can control your mind, either. Can a person with that level of skill really become a criminal who can cause an uproar in the Kingdom of Magic of Nagasaki? And moreover, he has five titles?”

“And that is why it is problematic. The sheer amount of magical capacity that Kagetani Hebiyuki has is almost abnormal.” Risuka said, sounding slightly hopeless. “Moreover, inside the ‘red jacket’ or, as that little sister called it, ‘a red jacket that looked like a safety pin’, I presume he’s stashed quite the large quantity of those arrows.”

“Large quantity? But they are supposed to be Magic Sigils, right?”

“Yeah. And you understand what this means, don’t you?”

I see. It takes a lot of magic and time to draw a single Magic Sigil. That's why a Magical Formula is somewhat easier to handle. This also confirms the truth that "simplicity is king". If we were to load that Magic Sigil into a large number of miniscule "arrows" used for darts, it would be unimaginable..

“His personality is sick. He’s a criminal, and he was even arrested, after all.”

"What? Arrested?"

“Four years ago. All the girls who had been abducted were found in his apartment at the same time. All of them dead.”

“...There isn’t a demand for ransom money, even after kidnapping?”
Certainly, there was no such phone call to Ariga Orie’s house at this point.
“...The heck? What’s that guy even planning?”

“Um...”

“What? Is it something you're not comfortable saying?”

"Not allowing the girl to change, maybe that." Risuka said with disgust.
“To slowly appreciate a girl who is "fixed" with Shadow Stitching, to observe her until she dies from exhaustion— I suppose this may sound silly, but

that's the actual "purpose" of Kagetani Hiroyuki, that's his motive for the kidnappings."

"Death by exhaustion...? And he does nothing?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. He just uses them as a sort of decoration for his room. The most disgusting thing, Kizutaka, is that he gives his shadow-sewn subjects the freedom to speak. He doesn't even dominate their consciousness. Generally speaking, if someone is stitched with Shadow Stitching, they wouldn't be able to speak. "He" goes out of his way to spend extra magical power to provide them the freedom to talk, but— you know what this means, don't you? Why would he give the freedom of speech to a subject who has been totally immobilised?"

"...Don't tell me....Is it to allow them to plead for their lives?"

"Right."

"That's disgusting."

"It is."

"Ultra-perverted."

"One of the reasons why he's considered an urban legend."

"A mysterious man in a red coat" It seems that the human world and the Kingdom of Magic are no different, even though they are separated from each other by the 'Gate', and even though there is a cultural gap between them.

"We call scumbags like him 'swines' too. Kinda ironic, in a different way. But he was arrested four years ago, right? Isn't it strange that they let him go after just four years? Are kidnapping crimes not taken seriously in Nagasaki?"

"It's ridiculous. Since everyone is a magician, the people of Nagasaki are very, very strict about crime. It doesn't matter if you're a holder of five titles or not, the license to practice magic skills is taken away without question... and after a trial, he should have been firmly granted a death penalty."

"Well then..."

"But," Risuka clearly asserted, "no one else could have done that. Among all the people I know, only Kagetani Hebiyuki fits the bill."

“.....”

"We can't ignore it." How should I put it? Risuka has always given people a gentle and introverted impression. Although she isn't cowardly, she can't be called strong either. Therefore, she really needed considerable determination to say this, "If the kidnapper is really *the* Kagetani Hebiyuki, she's in really big trouble."

"I guess you're right". At the very least, the reputation of the "Kingdom of Magic" — Nagasaki Prefecture — will be ruined. After all, magicians are just a group of people. Some of them are bound to be scum and lowlifes. But in that sense, I guess it's not at all different from our side. However, people outside always hold greater prejudice against black sheep who possess the power of "magic". For the ignorant public, the existence of such people is scandalous. If his crimes came to light, Risuka's efforts to uphold Nagasaki's reputation would be wasted. "It'd be like dropping a second atomic bomb on Nagasaki."

"It would definitely be Nagasaki's shame to let outsiders know that such people exist."

"You really love your hometown," I smiled. "But I don't think it's that simple. Since that guy's power is several times higher than yours, you wouldn't normally think of challenging him straightforwardly, would you? Hm... and, by the way, would you, by any chance, happen to be acquainted with Ariga Orie, the victim of this kidnapping?"

"Yeah. We were in the same class." Risuka replied. "She was so sweet, and kind to me."

"Huh..."

However, Risuka is nominally enrolled in an elementary school because it is a necessary procedure for Nagasaki residents to follow in order to live on this side of the border. Since she has hardly ever been to school (at school she's seen as a "truant"), given Orie's character, it's very possible that she was trying to persuade Risuka to come to school, just like I'm supposedly doing. Should I have thought of that?

"I hadn't known you two knew each other. I would have taken action a little sooner if I had."

"Three days have passed since the incident... I think that's pretty serious," Risuka said. If he's doing things the same way as he did in Nagasaki before... three or four days, in the worst case, maybe only one. Ariga can't

possibly survive longer than that. Although, if it were me, I would have probably died in 2 days.”

“You mean because he doesn’t allow you to eat, or even drink water?”

“That's right. Moreover," Risuka adds, "the victim in this case, Ariga-san, is not a magician. She’s just an ordinary human, so I am worried about her mental state.”

Mental state. If I were to express my impressions of Ariga Orie, I would say that she has strong willpower for a human being, but she’s just a common human in the end. I doubt that she even accepts the concept of magic itself. Since she won’t accept it, unprecedented fear will definitely sweep over.

"Time is very pressing."

“It’s really very pressing” Risuka took out a cutter knife from the holster at her waist — “Ka-chunk ka-chunk.....” and slipped it in and out. "So it has to be me who does something.....”

“"But," I say. " Isn't the magical power you own different? Will it even be possible for you? And from your description, this adversary seems to be the most difficult one out of all the magicians we’ve encountered over the past year."

".....”

“Are you confident?”

“Even if I don’t have confidence—”, Risuka averted her gaze from me and said, “This is something that needs to be done.”

“Yeah...”

Oh dear — I can't believe this line came from a girl who was watching sumo wrestling until just now. Risuka doesn't possess a strong sense of justice. Based on our past association, I can confirm that. Risuka should have no regard for ethics or morality, but— yet again, she says something very human-like. Or rather, she says words that a human can't speak easily. No matter how inconsequential it seems, this is definitely a new discovery, and that is very beneficial to me.... No, it should be said that all information about Risuka is very important to me. If you want to use a “pawn” to the fullest, you need to be well aware of said “pawn’s” abilities.

“However, Risuka.... you can't say that. You'd just be running to your death with no chance of survival. 'If you try, you won't regret not having done

anything.' I always hated that line of thinking. Because, if you are going to try, you need to ensure that you'll win! That's a rule that goes without saying. Only defeat awaits those who break that rule."

"...You don't have to help me," says Risuka, turning away. "Even if you don't help, I'll do it by myself."

"You have strong determination, but determination without results or merits is just a paranoid delusion. It's no better off than a joke."

"Laugh at me all you want, I don't care."

What a stubborn girl. I don't really understand what she's insisting on. That attitude she has towards me is unacceptable, but I don't particularly dislike that, because it makes her so easy to understand. I shall let that attitude slide for now. I sighed deliberately, "Oh dear," and then said, "Who said I wouldn't help?"

"I was the one who brought this story to you in the first place. I was the one who brought this to a start. So obviously, I am going to take responsibility for it. If this was just a normal kidnapping case, there would have been no reason in asking you for help. Rather, for one benefit, there would have been a hundred demerits. You would have conspicuously stood out, and I don't want to invite unnecessary attention if it's not needed — —however, if 'Magic' is involved, then that's a different case. In which case, a hundred demerits are accompanied by a thousand merits. That's reason enough for me to make a move with you, Risuka. Remember the previous promise? We'd help each other and work hard for each other's benefit."

"But," Risuka finally turns to me. "This time, the enemy.....Kagetani Hebiyuki is on a different level than the ones we've been dealing with until now — a normal person like yourself can't possibly deal with him....."

"Whoever it is, if you have to deal with him, it's only a matter of time before it's too late. And you haven't forgotten, have you, Risuka? Our final goal is Mizukura Shingo, your father: the most powerful magician in the world. If you can't even deal with a guy with only five titles, how can you find a man like Mizukura Shingo, who has 665 titles?"

Well, strictly speaking, "Nyarlathep," or rather, "Mizukura Shingo," is only Risuka's final goal, and not mine. For me, even he is just a passing point, but if I put that into words, the conversation would get derailed...

"Let's kick the 'Kingdom of Shadows' out of here, Risuka."

“—But... but, it's dangerous.” For some reason, Risuka doesn't seem very happy, despite the fact that I said I would cooperate with her. It's a good idea to get the cutter knife in and out a little early, ‘Ka-chunk schk schk...’ Schk schk schk...’

“Ki-Kizutaka, do you happen to know Ariga-san by any chance? Is that the reason why you are so insistent on helping out?”

“I know of her, yes. She's totally useless as of now, but she is a rare classmate who has the potential to turn into a good slave in the future. So I want to help you in any way I can.”

“——”

“But that is definitely not the point. To be honest, I don't care about her life or death at all—so Risuka. Please believe me, it's just that the big fat pig just pisses me off.” I drank the other half of my coffee in a single gulp, “That pig,” I said. “The worst thing about that pig is that he's wearing a red jacket, of all things. The color of red. ‘Your’ color. And I won't allow anyone else except you to have it.”

★★★

I get out of Risuka's room with an excuse and pick up the phone in the corridor (a black phone is installed in Risuka's room, but that's basically reserved for her use alone). I contact Kaede. This time, my father is in charge of investigating the kidnapping case, so it's dangerous to get any closer to him. Asking for information goes hand in hand with giving him information. If the criminal is found to be a magician, this case would never remain in his hands. Kaede answers the phone with a sleepy voice as usual, and I tell her to find out about a man named Kagetani Hebiyuki. I'm not sure how much time is left, and, as soon as I finish talking, I hang up the phone. Unlike Risuka, Kaede's quite easy to deal with, not listening to me only when I told her to stop using honorifics. However, if you ignore that one particular aspect, she's a pretty useful pawn. By the way, Kaede doesn't know about Risuka. I was acquainted with her before that. As is the case with my father, there are times when it is easier to move if you do not know about the existence of certain things in the world — If she knew about Kagetani, no matter how loyal Kaede is, she would definitely hesitate. Because of fear, maybe? It's an emotion that's hard to overcome, after all. Pondering over such thoughts, I return to Risuka's room and decide to discuss our strategy for the “Kingdom of Shadows”, Kagetani Hebiyuki.

“At any rate, I think there's the possibility of a gap.”

“Gap?”

“Well, it's not just the case for Kagetani, but all magicians. In general, magic is a method of distorting the truth, and when you distort something that is perfectly aligned, there is a gap that is created somewhere. For example, take the ‘gentlemanly’ personality of Kagetani, that personality is a flaw.”

“Hm? What does that mean?”

“You're a kidnapper who specializes in girls and you leave them to die a debilitating death by ‘doing nothing’? In other words, other than restraining her with ‘shadow stitching’, he wouldn’t do her any other harm. That's right — Kagetani won't touch the body.”

“A kidnapper who specializes in kidnapping young girls—that's a complicated expression, but in short, he's a perverted pedophile. Then, it's easy to imagine his tastes and preferences. And, if he doesn't have a taste for sadism and abuse, he can't attack her. She’s 10 years old, and unmistakably, she’s a girl.”

“Hmmm... maybe so.”

“What is it?”

“No, if that's the case, it's rather bad for us. Because, if he won’t attack me, I won't be able to use my last bargaining chip.”

“Ah, your trump card.”

Mizukura Risuka's last trump card— is, in short, to ‘die’. With her death as a condition for activation, the Magic Sigil built into her body would be activated. A Magic Sigil is composed of magic, and the spell inherent in that Magic Sigil is the ability to progress through “time”, which can advance Risuka 17 years into the future... While tTen year old Risuka's magic ability only allows her to be able to move forward for a maximum of ten days or so, on the other hand, the twenty-seven year old Mizukura Risuka is a different order of magnitude. As the future is variable, every time she ‘transforms’, her personality and appearance are will be slightly different; only her extremely belligerent character and her amazing ability are constant. She can make time go backwards and stop, slow down, or accelerate, all at her own will. For the past year or so, I've been cornered several times—but in the end, I was always helped by a 27-year-old “girl”. Her magical capacity is so high, no one else can compareshe can’t even be compared with. That's how much of a monster the 27-year-old Risuka is. And that's why I'm using her as a pawn. It's

because a pawn that's too big to handle will only get in the way of the board. However, that doesn't mean that Risuka is too rare to let go of. Mizukura Risuka, the beloved daughter of God and the Devil. The 10-year-old girl, and a 27-year-old woman. Setting that aside, however.... The world is not that convenient, and, of course, there are several inexplicable limitations placed on the 27-year-old Risuka. Firstly, there is a limit to the amount of time she can continue to be in that form. And, as a condition for activating it, when she dies, she has to release a large amount of blood. That is the source of Mizukura Risuka's magic power. It's not so bad if the enemy attacks you, and you can expect to bleed from your neck or heart, but this is not the case with a death by exhaustion.

“Well, it's not all good.”

“That's not all. If I'm blocked from moving by the ‘shadow stitch’, I can't hurt myself with this cutter — that means I can't use any magic at all.”

“.....”

“I'm just a kid with no magic.”

“But if you can ‘speak’ even if you're ‘shadow stitched’, you can still chant spells, right?”

“Uhm... it's possible, but I think the other party has already expected this. Either he is planning to deprive the target of his ability to speak, or he may cast ‘Additional Chanting’ on the Magic Sigil in advance and directly attach the effect to the arrow. In any case, I cannot use the Magic Formula and the Magic Sigil when I am fixed. Even if I want to chant a spell, he will inevitably increase the time required to chant it. In this case, I have the same flaws as the other party, and the other party's situation is definitely better than mine.”

“Hm,” the blood flowing through Risuka's body hides a lot of magical styles. A magician who can only use magic when she bleeds... Risuka herself said that she wasn't very good at chanting spells. No good at all, she would really be just a child then. “Then, for example.....Risuka, if you are ‘shadow stitched’, can you ‘omit’ that ‘fixed’ state? Whether or not it's done via the use of the formula in your blood, we'll set that aside for now.”

“Hmm.....” Risuka thought for a moment, ““I'm not sure, but I can't think of a way to do itI don't see a way to do it in my imagination. My ‘movement’ is ‘time movement’, so it has to be certain that there is a future where I'm ‘liberated from a fixed state’; otherwise, neither time nor distance can be omitted.”

"I see, so it's better to assume that you won't be able to use that," I said, nodding. "...But, one more thing, another thing, I don't really understand the mechanism behind 'shadow stitching'. Is the moment of activation when the arrow hits the object's shadow? Does it mean that, when the arrow hits the object's shadow, that will be its moment of activation?"

"Umm, that's what I think."

"Hm... is that so? Understandable. Well, it's nice to know that we're dealing with a famous criminal here. Information can be acquired easily. That is usually the hardest part of the job. Knowing oneself is easy, but getting to know the enemy is not, not to mention that the enemy comes from the other side of the "city gate."

"In terms of principle, I think both 'object manipulation' and 'shadow stitching' should be inseparable from the law of inertia. The so-called 'fixed' means 'maintain the current state', since you said his purpose is to 'nNot let the girl degenerate' and 'kKeep her the girl in her current state'. Does this mean that he can also stop objects in mid-air?"

"There is a rumour that he can even fix a plane mid-flight. That alone is very tricky"

"It's a really difficult situation. Although the rumors are not necessarily correct, they can, at the very least, be considered to be 50% credible. If there is such an effect, the enemy's magic power is stronger than imagined. Can he Therefore, he can also use curtains or things like sheets fixed in mid-air to make a 'wall'?"

"I don't understand what you mean..... Oh, nevermind, I get it now. But, that's wrong not true, Kizutaka. That area is, um..." she tilts her head, as if looking thinking for the appropriate word, "Yes, it's the same as my 'time progression'. The 'time' that I can operate is only the one restricted to my body. It's the same. Because that 'arrow' only acts on the presence of the object — you can 'fix' the curtains and the sheets in the air, but that 'fixation' is meaningless to anything else. You can brush it away with your hand, and if a stone hits it, it will be disrupted, and if the wind blows it, it will fly away."

"Hmm..., is that so?" Speaking of which, Ariga Orie's sister was also 'fixed' just like her, but was she rescued by another person? If she was had been 'fixed' so perfectly that she could not be interfered with by others, then it would have been a big topic at that point. In general, if he was they were able to 'shadow stitch' to that extent, then Kagetani wouldn't couldn't even be able to kidnap Araga Orie in the first place. It's was obvious understandable if you think about it. It's was a little embarrassing that I

couldn't figure it out on my own. "Then, if it's just me and Risuka, we can help each other. In that theory, if you remove your own shadow from the arrow stuck in the ground with a shadow stitch, you should be able to move freely."

"It's true that if you remove the 'arrow' from the 'shadow' you will be free. It's a good idea to have someone pull out an arrow, or ask them to shift their body to move the shadow — but he has two arms," said Risuka, indicating with her arms. The handcuffs on her right arm clanged. "With two arms, you can take down two targets. Especially if two of them are within the acceptable range."

"And it's not like three people can get away with it either. Hmm... Well then, what about the opposite? Would he get stuck if he accidentally overlapped his own shadow with the victim?"

"From the point of view of the activation conditions, the arrow was activated at the moment the shadow was 'stabbed', so the situation you said, it shouldn't happen."

"That's vague."

"I don't have firsthand knowledge."

"Hmmm.....", for someone who doesn't know him directly, I have a feeling she's extremely knowledgeable about the details. She already knows Ariga Ori, so is it possible that maybe Risuka is acquainted with Kagetani Hebiyuki as well? I thought about it, but the possibility seems unlikely. Then, is it just because he's an infamous kidnapper? It's hard to understand how criminals are judged beyond the 'gate,' but, will the magic they use be publicly announced for safety reasons? However, if they do that, is there a possibility that imitation criminals will appear? Ah, I shouldn't judge different cultures by my sense of perception here. That would be stupid. Just like how humans who feed on cows, pigs, and even whales cannot understand the idea of vegetarianism.

"Well, I guess that's fine."

"Okay, so... Yes, his arrows are suitable for all kinds of objects? Whether it's people, magicians, or even objects such as bed sheets or bed curtains, it includes the 'inside' as well, right?"

"Well, There are also several kinds of 'object manipulation' techniques that are only applicable to humans. They are usually called 'human manipulation'; however, 'Kingdom of Shadow' does not use this type of magic."

“I guess Kagetani isn’t that stupid.”

If it is “girl-manipulation” magic, there is nothing to be afraid of, but of course this is a joke. The magical attributes and types of magicians are inherent, but if the abilities applied are related to each person's personality. If I were a magician, what kind of magic would I use? A slightly impertinent but innocent delusion flashed through my mind.

“Kizutaka?”

“Yes?”

“Are those all the questions you have?”

“No, just one more. This one is actually just one of a personal interest. What does a ‘Jacket that looks like a safety pin’ even mean?”

“You don’t know?”

“I think that, apparently, Kagetani was wearing one of those.”

“Well, it's easy to explain, but it's hard to explain it in a way that people outside the prefecture can understand, so... well, you will understand when you see it, I guess...”

“Well, yeah, probably.”

Just as I said that, there was a discreet knock on the door, as if it was timed, as if it was measured. When Risuka said, “Come in,” the door opened without a sound and Chamberlain, holding a telephone cord, came in from the other side. Chamberlain is the direct butler of Risuka's house, and also the master of the coffee shop run on the first floor of Risuka's two-story, windmill-inspired house. By the way, coffee shops are not half as popular as they used to be in the past. “A phone call for Kugi,” Chamberlain said, holding out a telephone handset to me. I said “thank you” and took it, and then Chamberlain bowed reverently to me and Risuka and went out of the room again without a sound. Hmmm... I wish I had a slave who was that orderly. I gave Risuka a look, then picked up the phone. As I had half-expected, it was Kaede. As always, her voice was sleepy, but she works fast while being competent and talented. It had barely been 5 minutes since the last phone call, and she was already ready with information regarding Kagetani Hebiyuki. I committed it to memory. When I thanked her, she said, “You're very welcome, it's great to be of service to you, Kugi-san,” and with that she hung up.

Perhaps it's also a matter of personality, human nature. I guess using honorific language is just a part of her personality; it can't be helped.

"So this Kaede from now was your partner?"

"Hmm? Mmm."

"I thought you'd asked Kuzutsugi-san for help?"

Kuzutsugi, that was the name of my father.

"I thought about that, but he's on the side of political authority after all. I thought it would be best not to tell him that the kidnapper was a magician."

"I don't think you should be involving this 'Kaede' either."

"Yeah? But Kaede is a useful pawn."

"....."

"What? I said it in the most comprehensible way."

"I would rather not comprehend that, then," Risuka seemed to hang her head in disappointment. She's just weakly messing around with the cutter knife.

"So? What did you find out about Kagetani Hebiyuki?"

"What I've found out is, uh... an address."

"What?"

"I got an address," I said. "No hiding, no timidity, no holding up the nameplate, he's living right here in Saga Prefecture."

"No way!"

"He has set up his house a bit near the outskirts . It seems that he has come from somewhere recently and has registered his resident's card which was delivered to the government office." In other words, it would have been possible to immediately find him, even if Kaede wasn't involved. Kagetani Hebiyuki isn't such a common name, making it easy to find.

"A name like that is just begging to be found out"

“.....”

Risuka was silent for a while. “Suspicious”, she said.

“Hmmm... it's almost as if he wanted to be found out.”

“Yeah. That's what I think, too. It's very convenient.” Such seamless coincidences can only be found in third-rate mystery novels. If this is not a coincidence, but a deliberate arrangement by that man, I am afraid it will become a trap no less than a Magic Sigil.

”This is... this is an inconvenient development.”

“It's like he's confidently saying, ‘Find me...’”

“I would rather not, but then again, we have no choice. The police will be looking for him soon enough. Because Ariga Orié's younger sister clearly saw Kagetani Hiroyuki's appearance. Due to her young age, her testimony was not given much credence, but even from that eyewitness account alone — it's enough to trace it. And if that's the case... we don't have ‘time’.”

“Hmmm... that's right. If it's Kizutsugi, I'm sure,” says Risuka. “That your snooping would be completely uncovered.”

“.....”

Hmm.... I don't know why, but Risuka seems to have put more trust in my father than she should. She seems to have way more trust in my father than necessary, which is a bit of an obstacle for me to eventually win over her. I am currently being ignored, completely. The reason why Risuka came to the outside of the prefecture is to find her father, so it's not hard to understand that she has some feelings about the concept of a father. And so, as the one with a big heart, I will permit that. For the time being, at least.

“We are running out of time”. Ariga Orié's still captured. “Kizutaka, what's the time?”

“6:20. I think Chamberlain-san must be getting the dinner ready for us by now. Shall we eat and then go? Or do you want to go without eating?”

“...I want to go right now, but...” Risuka hesitates and reluctantly turns around. “It would be too careless and ineffective to go without a plan—”

“No, that's not true,” I said. “As we've been talking, I've already come up with seven different strategies.”

“Se-seven?”

Risuka looked at me with her red eyes, as if she was startled. I don't think there's any need to be so blatantly surprised. I am not a person who's just going to stand there silently. With all that information I'm getting, I can come up with a countermeasure or two, whether it's right or not.

“Well, that said, I could use all of them if I had the time, but right now I don't have the time, and I can only use one or two of them at most. But, well, that's probably enough. We have a good chance of winning.”

“Really?”

Risuka was still skeptical it seems. It was a cautiousness that could be called distrust or considered as a form of betrayal towards me, but let's just generously take it as genuine fear of Kagetani. Thinking about it, Risuka was still a “girl” after all, when Kagetani had caused that incident in the “Kingdom of Magic.” Even if she had the aura of the Red Witch of Time, she is, after all, just a weak girl. It's only natural for her to be unable to fully control her inner fears.

“Yeah. Trust me.”

“I believe in you, but...”

“Can you ‘skip’ to the address where Kagetani lives?”

We were running out of time and the conversation felt endless. And I needed Risuka to keep up with me, so I half-heartedly decided to proceed with a rushed conversation. I told her the address I learnt from Kaede and, to keep it short, Risuka has the ability to use ‘time progression’ to also move through space. When she uses it, Risuka (and me, if I’m “attached” to her) can warp through any distance without taking any time at all. Although, the ability to “omit” space-time is limited to the points she has a precise spatial coordinate grasp of, i.e. where she has been before. It's one of the few beneficial uses of her magic at this point in her life, at the age of ten. Risuka looks down “Nn...” and plays around with the cutter, “Schkschkschkschk...”, “Schkschkschkschk...”, “Schkschkschkschk...”, and “Schkschkschkschk...”. The handcuffs on her arm jingled.

“Hm... I don't remember. I've never been there.”

“Ah, I see. So you won't be able to skip there”

“Wait a minute,” Risuka said, as she pulled out a road map of Saga Prefecture from her bookshelf. Pulling out the index, she flipped through the pages. “Ah. I’ve never been there, but I’ve passed through the nearby station. If I push myself a little harder, I might be able to make it.”

“I see. But let’s avoid that this time. If the enemy is that powerful, the strongest we’ve ever encountered, then we shouldn’t waste our magic power. It’s not that far away, let’s go by train.”

“But...”

“No buts, although it’s true that we don’t have the time, but that doesn’t mean we can afford to decrease our chances of winning. My plan would be rendered useless if something were to happen to Risuka’s magic power. The premise of my plan is based on the existence of Risuka and her magical capabilities. If you try to omit over a distance of that range, you will consume a lot of magical power. Also when you omit, it would be bad if you were to be met with some kind of accident.”

“Okay.....”

Risuka seemed dissatisfied, but nodded in agreement for now. Then she continued, “I need to get ready ASAP. No dinner. I’m going to buy a bottle of water on the way,” she said, getting off her chair and putting on her hat that was on the hanger. It’s a triangular hat that’s not the right size, it’s too heavy and makes her look ridiculous when she wears it. And then, just as Risuka is about to leave the room with her calm sword (not a sword, but a utility knife), I stop her, “Hey, wait a minute,” I say.

“Aren’t you going to listen to my plan?”

“I don’t know what it is, but we can talk about it on the train.”

“Don’t you want to decide if it’s valid first?”

“That’s right, it has been decided,” Risuka replied, without turning around. “It doesn’t even require confirmation. Kizutaka’s plans have never failed before, and I am confident that they won’t this time either.”

“

I smiled - or maybe it was more like a little smirk - and muttered, "Good. That's good. It's a very good feeling, a very good feeling. With that trust, no matter if the enemy is the 'Kingdom of Shadow' or whatever, even if it's Risuka's father, Nyarlathotep, no enemy could stop us. There's nothing we can't do... in some way, I'm sure."



The situation so far has been way too smooth, this kind of smoothness can only be expected in some` third-rate novels. Like a trap; it's too good to be true. And to some extent Risuka does seem to be more concerned about it than me, who is basically apathetic to the whole situation. That shows the difference in our degree of worry. It is even more so now that there is no longer much difference in prior knowledge regarding Kagetani Hebiyuki. It goes without saying that he is proudly "residing" there, as if to taunt us into finding him - in which case, we need to consider the selection of the victims. If you are a mindlessly optimistic person. you would just think that Ariga Orié was selected "by chance". Based on the testimony of Ariga Orié's younger sister, I came to the conclusion that there was a magician involved. But even if I didn't intervene she would have followed this issue sooner or later anyways.... After all, Ariga Orié and Risuka are in the same class. There's a contact network in the school, so she would have eventually found it out. She wouldn't even have required me to find out about the "appearance" of the suspicious man, or his information. She would have simply needed to contact the governmental authorities to find out his address. The process was so simplistic that anyone could have done it. What meaning is there to it? In other words... simply put, she would have been caught up in the crossfire no matter what. Anyways, thinking about the possible reasons for kidnapping Ariga.... (This is a completely random guess) maybe because she was the first in her class, or perhaps (and this is a completely random guess) because she was the number one in terms of attendance or, putting it more bluntly, maybe because she was the chairperson of the committee - any of these reasons could serve as a reason for being targeted. This reasoning is not particularly random, except for the basis behind it, which is reasonably well founded. For a little over a year now, Risuka has been hunting for magicians who have been doing bad things here, there, and everywhere, all the while looking for her father, ever since she came across the "castle gate" (or more accurately, through the "castle gate") from the other side. It's not a title, but she's been called the "magician hunter" by some, and she's reasonably famous among magicians in the prefecture's outskirts. She's been here for about two years, and I've been her companion for little over a year now. It's very possible that Kagetani Hebiyuki is as well acquainted with Mizukura Risuka as Risuka was with Kagetani Hebiyuki. Furthermore, this hypothesis was confirmed, albeit weakly. I confirmed it by asking - "Who was the one who arrested Kagetani Hebiyuki, the 'Kingdom of Shadow' four years ago?". On being asked this question, Risuka made a slightly doubtful face, and replied "It was my father - Mizukura Shingo". Ah, so it's no wonder that Risuka knows so much about

Kagetani Hebiyuki. In that case, I find myself being unrelated to this case. That makes me feel bad. This kind of thing really makes me feel bad. I won't deny that I am feeling a bit anxious about all this, but..... Although we have prepared a plan, I still can't deny that jumping into a place where you know the other party has a trap in mind is not something I'm comfortable with, or at least it's an odd move that doesn't feel legitimate. However, in Risuka's words, "This is something that we need to do no matter what." We have no other choice. The fact is that defeat is unacceptable, can't be allowed even once. That's right, when you have to make a suicide attack, you have to ensure that you win. That was, of course, within the bounds of common sense. Well, now that you mention it, the condition for victory this time is to rescue Ariga Orié safely, right? If it's as the story goes, Ariga Orié isn't dead just yet, so there's a good chance she can be rescued. If she was taken hostage in the course of the battle, it would be troublesome to abandon her, but otherwise, I'll save her to the best of my efforts. The more important question is whether or not I can use Kagetani Hebiyuki as a pawn. I don't mind that, but I'm sure Risuka won't like it, especially this time. Well, as usual, we'll see what happens. And so on and so forth, talking to Risuka and asking her questions, and finally arriving at the train station, I bought some extra waterbottles and things for Risuka at the station's kiosk (even for people of the Kingdom of Magic water is indispensable. What an ironic story). And thus---

"Volkswagen, right? Come to think of it, I've heard that cars aren't vehicles in Nagasaki Prefecture, but rather disasters that fall from the sky.... If that's the case, he must be getting used to life on the outskirts of the prefecture" I said, looking at the pretty yellow exterior of the car parked in the garage of an old-fashioned, tasteful house, "There's no doubt about it."

He must feel no embarrassment, no pedantry. The police, who are all trying hard to locate the kidnapper, are not even aware he's right here. I'm someone who rarely feels sorry for others, but for once, I felt a bit of pity for my father. "Hmm?" I looked to Risuka for a response, but she just stared at the house with a nervous expression on her face. Three floors, facing south. The area is a bit of a quiet, rural town. Between the gate and the house, there is a rather large garden.

"Risuka?"

"It's as if there are no tricks to the house itself. There's no Magic Formula or Magic Sigil on it."

"I see. Can it possibly just be skillfully concealed?"

"No, I am sure of it. There are no Magic Sigils or Magic Formulas involved here." Risuka says, moving towards the gatepost. She extended her finger towards the intercom. Above the intercom is a brand new nameplate, "Kagetani". It says.

"Let's go. Kizutaka"

"Okay"

"PLAY GAME"

Risuka pressed the intercom. There is no response. It's an intercom with a camera, so they should be able to see us. But even when she rang it again, there was no response. It's almost unlikely, but it could have been a civilian with the same name, so we were just taking precautions - but we didn't need to take any more precautions. We took the liberty of opening the gate, stepped on a stepping stone, and made our way to the front door. Judging by the way things had unfolded up to this point, it was blatantly unlocked. A series of unreasonable coincidences. I nodded to Risuka and urged her on. Risuka pulled the door open. Strangely the inside of the house - was dimly lit.

"It's pitch black.", I whispered to Risuka. "This environmental condition is really unnatural. Theoretically, without a source of light, there can't be any shadows. If he wanted an advantage it all should have been brighter."

"Ah, there's this bright room right over there." Risuka points to the end of the corridor with the knife she already has readied. A few rays of light shot from the crack in the door at the end of the corridor, and it seemed that the target was in the room. Apparently - that was our destination. "Risuka. For the time being, cut your arm," I said. Risuka accepted my proposal, and after giving a nod, made a long and deep crack in her left arm.

The knife was inserted. The thick liquid gurgled out, red, red, red, red, red, blood that flows so distinctly that it can be clearly seen in the darkness.

"Let's go. It's dark, so close one eye just in case. You don't want to be caught off guard by the light."

"Right."

Then we crawl in through the front door without taking off our shoes. It takes us some time to get past the stairs and some doors - to our destination, the only door in the house that shines with light. I didn't

recognize the light switch in the hallway, and even if I did, I wouldn't have acted so carelessly. I'm the first to arrive at the door, and I let Risuka do the opening. And thus, in the darkness, a light explodes.

“I have been expecting you, Risuka-chan!”

A flood of light – beyond the darkness of the light – a man, a man, was standing. I didn't expect him to be like that, not from the description I had heard so far. He was just a man, not exactly 'huge'. The word "huge" had no connection with him. Goes to show that the testimony of a third grader is from the point of view of a third grader. I think the best way to describe him would be to say he's "medium height and medium build", rather than a giant, as the testimony seemed to imply. The "size" of the person, compared to a little girl, is quite large, so it's not necessarily that far off the truth. Also, the story that "pig" was a respectable title wasn't a lie either. Leather pants and a black shirt. And a dull, unimportant red jacket of an unusual design – a jacket that looks like a safety pin. I see – a picture is worth a thousand words. No, it's impossible to imagine what that jacket looks like even after hearing a thousand descriptions. The only way to describe it in our language is that it is like a safety pin. It's hard to understand the taste of the residents of Nagasaki. This suspicious man – Kagetani Hebiyuki looked at Risuka – in a repulsive manner – he looked at Risuka. And then, "I've been waiting for you," he repeated, once again in an ominous voice.

“.....Ugh”

Risuka took a step back from Kagetani as if disgusted. She's feeling weak. This is not good. But then, as if inspiring herself, Risuka took three steps forward, forcibly, as if to make up for the step that was lowered. I remain still and look around this room where the other person is waiting. It's a wooden floored room, but that's all. After all, it lacks furniture, has high ceilings, and is lit up by bright electric lights. And the windows were fully open, allowing the moonlight to filter in evenly at night. My shadow and Risuka's were clearly and distinctly reflected on the wooden floor. Since there's a window, there's no point in destroying the lights – I guess. And the ceiling is high, too. I had the option of choosing midnight on a cloudy day, but I couldn't do that because of the time limit – I already discussed that with Risuka beforehand. However, there is no real reason to fight on the "battlefield" in favor of the enemy – but if this is to be considered a test, it is a different story. Yes, it's a trial, an ordeal that must be overcome. I wonder if the lack of furniture is to avoid creating extra shadows...

“Hmm? Hmm? Hmmm?” Kagetani, there, looked at me with the utmost suspicion – as if he hadn't noticed me before. “What are you? You are what? Why did a young boy come here? I am not interested in young boys.”

“Oh, but I'm very interested in magicians. Even if they are pigs like you”

I tried to respond in that way to provoke him, but Kagetani just nodded a "hmp" as if it didn't matter and quickly turned his attention to Risuka. He really doesn't care about anything but the girl. Must be his intrinsic nature.

“I'm glad to accept the invitation, Risuka-chan,” Kagetani said with a smile, which in the words of Origa's little sister, was ‘creepy’.

“ Risuka-chan. Risuka-chan. Risuka-chan ,aaaaahhh! You are so adorable. You look just like ‘that person’s’ daughter. Cute, cute, just so cute!”

“.....”

Risuka looked at me as if to ask for help. I point at the enemy with my chin, as if to tell Risuka to keep her eyes on him. With this, Risuka reluctantly returns her gaze to her enemy.

“...That person's daughter...” Risuka mustered all her courage to speak out. "By that person... you mean my dad?”

“Bingo!” You are such a quick thinker, Risuka-chan. That kind of intelligence leaves my head spinning around. Round and round and round....guruguru guruguru guruguru” Kagetani said.

“That's good, that's good. I like smart girls, and I love it when girls are smart. If she's smart - I'd like to keep her smart and fixed. If she's clever, she should stay clever and keep her cleverness locked in place. Well, you can't do that forever because you're going to die.”

The distance from Kagetani to Risuka is about five meters. It's a bit far for me - but Risuka, who is bleeding right now, can "omit" that gap at any time without chanting. Only if she doesn't misplace the timing, that is.

“What are you aiming for?”

“Hmm?”

“The reason why you abducted Ariga-san. No, not only that but also the reason why you, a criminal, would live so proudly outside the prefecture. Just what is your purpose?”

“It's all about you, Risuka-chan. What other reason could I have for being here, Risuka-chan? What other reason and purpose could I have other than you?”

Kagetani answered immediately. He had a somewhat happy expression. Really – he's a man who makes me feel sick to the core. That's it. I've given up on the idea of recruiting him as a minion. As of now, he's just a disposable item. He is worth nothing more than that.

"Um, Orie-chan, was it? The girl I kidnapped to lure you out eh? She's quite the cutie. She's a real first-class product. She might be a bad human, but she's a really good maiden, moreover, she's from Nagasaki. The girls in Nagasaki are Double S Ranked. Double S!"

"I was born and raised in Moriyashiki"

"Ahahahahah. Is that so? It doesn't matter, hey, that's what it's all about." Kageya laughed. "Oh, you have a cutter knife, isn't it? It's cute. But can't you wait a minute before you come at me? It's just that I got a certain work to do before that, you know..."

"Work"? At those words, me and Risuka, who were about to move, stopped. We stopped moving even though the shadows hadn't been sewn up yet.

"Let me convey his message at least, or that person will be mad at me. I don't want him to be angry with me. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Um....yeah. It's a message from your father..."

Father – Mizukura Shingo. For me, it's "as I thought" – and for Risuka, it's "no way". A little over two years ago, ever since she arrived in Saga, she had been searching for that name, since she came to the prefecture's outskirts, and now, at long last, she had finally, at long last, found it.

"Fu-fu, don't you look different? You are so cute.."

"My father!"

Risuka – yelled at him.

"What did my father say? Stop putting on airs and tell it straightforward, you lowlife! Just be grateful that a vulgar, lowly criminal like you is even getting the privilege to talk to me!"

It's bad – she's lost her temper. That's her weakness, it's really bad. Kagetani, as if expecting it just smiled even more unpleasantly and repulsively than before and just said, "That's so cute." From the situation, it may not be intentionally provoking, but – this magician is too incompatible with Risuka.

“Ahahaha! Your reaction is just like that person said. A wise girl becoming stupid in just a moment. Not bad, not bad at all. I was going to “fix” you up right away, but I guess it that can wait”

Immediately—Kagetani, for the first time, showed a serious expression. To be precise, it was as if his previous expression was erased. And now, surprisingly, he had a well-ordered face. Unexpectedly handsome and noble. And then he started speaking. In other words, it was the message from Mizukura Shingo.

“Risuka”

The words came from Kagetani’s mouth, but they did not belong to Kagetani.

“Stay out of my way.”

Strange... evil and sacred...

“It’s about time you went back to Moriyashiki”

The sound of his voice was like a chaotic mess.

“Moreover”

And at that point the voice reverted back to Kagetani's. The noble expression also reverted back to that former one, weird and wobbly.

“‘Moreover’, after that it’s just a heartwarming love letter for his lovely daughter. But that’s of no relevance. There was nothing else, I assure you. That’s it”

“That's it?” Risuka took a step forward, feeling somewhat out of sync and not trying to hide her disappointment.

“There’s nothing else at all?”

“You poor, poor, poor, poor, poor, soul. I feel sorry for you, but that's all I've got, Risuka-chan. Risuka-chan, Risuka-chan, Risuka-chan.”

“...don't call me by my name when you don't have to.”

“Ahahahaa” Kagetani laughs.

"Or maybe there was indeed another message alongside it? Was there? Or was there not?"

With those words from Kagetani, Risuka took a further step forward, as if she was attracted by those words. Those words were a trap. If she keeps getting drawn in, there would no longer be a point in Risuka having hurt her arm beforehand. She isn't at a level as of now where she can react faster than Kagetani's darts. 'Omission' is only a technique for taking the first move. It is meaningless if you are the first to be attacked. However, Risuka does not notice this. She doesn't even try to notice it.

"What did you mean by "another one"?"

"The message is over. So shall we continue from where we left off?"

And with that Kagetani Hebiyuki's—right arm, moved.

"Let me take good care of you, Risuka-chan!"

Risuka finally realised that the situation was not good but it was too late. Too late. Regardless of whether a magical expression is woven into it, it is impossible for Risuka to activate magic faster than the dart's "arrow". No matter how much the magical expression woven into Risuka's blood is directly related to that of Mizukura Shingo, Risuka's own magical power cannot fully respond to it. The magical expression engraved in Risuka's blood, and the characteristic that even a small amount of magic does not even require casting a spell, does not mean that the time lag until the concentration of the mind does not disappear. Magic is very vulnerable to this kind of 'surprise attack'. Because it is a 'skill' where mental concentration and mental power are important, if it is disturbed - if it is disturbed, there is no way you can respond to it. And in case of a battle involving magic, the one who is unable to respond is the one who loses.

"_ _!"

That arrow - the arrow pierced deep into the place where Risuka's shadow had been. It was sewn to the flooring, flooring - sewn to the flooring. "Shadow Stitching" - the magic of "Kagetani Hebiyuki", "Kingdom of Shadow", "Pig Singer", "The Circle of Swine", "The Red Pig Gentleman", "The Genius of Malice". A criminal in the Kingdom of Magic, in Nagasaki Prefecture - Shadow Stitching.

"But... oh!."

I said with a sigh. "Get out of here, Risuka!"

"...I'm sorry."

Risuka apologized to me in a really apologetic tone, and stepped back one step. The "arrow"...is out of Risuka's shadow.

"What th—"

Kagetani - seemed surprised, as if unable to believe. I look at Risuka — and after a long time, I shake my head.

"The explanation is... well, it's unnecessary, as they say, seeing is believing" I pointed the light from the flashlight in my right hand, which I had just bought at a kiosk at the station, at Kagetani's feet. There's quite the interesting variety of things on sale at kiosks these days.

"What... you roundworm, just what the heck did you do?"

"In a non-stylish way, you can call it a laser beam." I played by turning the tip of the light around. "If it's a 'Magic Sigil' that activates when you hit the target's 'shadow', then you can just erase that shadow. It's a simple story, a simple story, really clear, really clear. You don't have to erase everything, just the point that the 'arrow' sticks, just do it like this."

"Y-you bastard! Just who the heck do you think you are?"

"My name is Kugi Kizutaka; I'm the one who brings happiness to people."

"Gu-gugg-gugu-gu"

Kageya... growls with his face red. It doesn't seem like my words can reach him. It looks like there is no room for negotiation. "Shadow stitch". That simple kind of power has many gaps in its variety of applications. In the end a lowlife, is just a lowlife.

"In that case, if my power has a gap, then let me tell you, your workaround has a gap too! I'll stop the both of you from moving!" Kagetani screamed, this time raising both arms at the same time. Each arm holding one 'arrow'. "I have two arms!"

And then, two arrows are released...

"You're just a dumbass to boot."

"Fuu" Risuka sighs in comfort. "N...Kagetani-san. Isn't Ariga-san safe? She is, right? You're a really notorious kidnapper... but' you never bring physical harm to other humans, just like a Gentleman. My father told me all that."

"... On the second floor."

"Huh? I can't hear you."

"She's on the second floor," Kagetani said, looking away from us and staring at the floor. "She's fixed in a room on the second floor. I planned to release her when Risuka-chan arrived."

"Huh."

"I don't want to challenge the public power of the outside world, let alone be a criminal who harms my hometown by way of an atomic bomb."

Well, it was a bit unexpected, but if you think about it carefully, it makes sense. The residents of the "Magic Kingdom" cannot cross the sea. To some extent, they are a group of "contained magicians." Perhaps for them, the atomic bomb is really a threat that cannot be ignored.

"Will you let Ariga-san go, please?"

"Yeah that was the plan all along."

"And..."

"But I don't want to do it anymore!"

Kagetani Hebiyuki - raised his arms.

"To hell with this Gentlemanly act now!"

The movement of the arrow can be judged from the opponent's line of sight and arm movements. If the other party is wearing sunglasses, it is naturally not so easy to judge. but I knew from the prior information from Ariga's sister that Kagetani didn't wear those, so I boldly assumed in advance that I could judge the movement of the arrow. However, this only stops at judging the "movement". Although it is similar to the "foresight" of magic to some extent, it does not mean that I have the ability to counteract or defend. Judging the movement and avoiding are definitely two different things. The

arrow attacking the shadow is easy to defuse, but the arrow pointing at oneself is difficult to prevent.

“Urgh”

I was shot with 2 arrows that pierced in each of my arms – each one of them pierced deep into my elbows – and I dropped the flashlight in my hand to the floor. Poof, poof, both of them. As if aiming at the flashlight, blood splattered from my elbow and elbow, falling to the floor as well. My arteries were completely damaged. The pain is... intense. My vital points are definitely pierced.

"Ah hahahaha!"

After that, Kagetani threw two more "arrows". We still have a chance.. I was the only one who was attacked, and I was the only one, and Risuka was completely safe – as long as she omits the distance, the game is still on our side. Nevertheless, Risuka was distracted at the critical moment. She was looking at my bloody arms. Even though it was in the middle of a battle, she was just looking away. And when she realised her mistake, Risuka turned to Kagetani —but that was already too late — In the shadow of Risuka, one "arrow" was pierced first, and another was thrown with the left hand. The other "arrow" sticks in my shadow. — “Shadow stitching” body binding. I can't move. Though I can think, my body does not move to my will. I can't make even the slightest movement. This is... Is this what it means to be "fixed"? Risuka — it's the same for her. With this, the situation has been completely reversed.

“Ahahahahahahahahaha!” Kagetani's unpleasant laughter echoed throughout the room “Suck it up. That's what happens when you try to make light of me. You damn bastard, lowly human! I'll never forgive you for anything, ever again, no matter what happens, even if you bleed to death. No, you won't die so easily. I will make sure that you receive the shall be the most painful one I can possibly inflict. I AM GOING TO TORTURE YOU TO DEATH YOU GOD-DAMNED SON OF A BITCH”

“Weren't you supposed to be a gentleman,” I barely speak. Just like the testimony said, only the freedom to speak was allowed “Although that change is really easy to understand, you've simply fallen to rock bottom.”

“Idiot! Don't you get cheeky with me, I only did that while dealing with girls! Hell, I'm not even going to do that anymore! Risuka-chan!”

Kagetani glares at Risuka -- to be more precise, he looks like a carnivore that has caught his prey. If she were allowed to move her body, Risuka would have definitely been trembling.

“I'll choose you to be the first girl I hurt.”

“Ugh.....” Risuka expressed disgust. But Risuka, who can't move, can't even allow herself to look away from Kagetani, the object of her disgust. “Ugh. Uuuh.”

“Exciting isn't it! Haha, even Oriechan upstairs... there's nothing That can stop me now, I don't care about the nuclear issue! I'm going to get on the ark and...

“I plan to leave Kyushu anyway!”

I was totally stunned at the words -- so much had happened, it was as if the pain had been blown away from my mind - to the point that I couldn't even feel the pain in my arms. After all, a "magician" is planning to "get out" of "Kyushu"? He doesn't plan to leave through the city gate? — That's not possible - it's impossible to do such a thing. It's a wild and absurd joke. Magicians can't cross the sea, and weak people can't even cross rivers or lakes. What are you talking about? What is this man talking about? Has he really lost his mind? I can't help but think he's insane. Even I have never thought of such a thing. It's an idea that no one in their right mind would ever think of. Only Mizukura Shingo could possibly do that. He's the only one, and that's it.

“Risuka”

I said - to Risuka. Because she couldn't turn around, Risuka looked toward Kagetani - who continued to laugh broadly - and responded shortly, "What?" Her voice is firm. You know what I'm going to say, without needing to be told.

“This is no longer a time for choosing a method.”

.....

“Mission number one has failed. All right, then. Let's go with plan two.”

“...Uh, um. Um...-” Risuka fumbled, “W-wait a minute”

“We can't wait. And it seems that you can't 'omit' it after 'fixing' it where the blood was flowing from your arm, after all. Magic itself doesn't

seem to be blocked.....as expected..... In order to counter the 'magic', your own method of manipulating magic power is apparently not enough."

The ability to imagine the future, huh? It's a challenge.

"But, but, but, but..".

"We're running out of time. Just get on with it."

"Ah, but still," Risuka still hesitates. "I'm sure you'll think of something better. I'm sure Kizutaka will come up with a better plan, so I'm going to save that as a last, last resort."

"It's the last situation already. there's no other option, now's the time for that kind of measure"

"B-But, but s-s-still"

"Enough, Risuka!"

I couldn't help raising my voice.

"You dare talk to me in that tone! Who do you think you are? Just whose fault do you think it is that we are screwed up? All thanks to you getting distracted. If I want you to do it, you should just obey. You have to realize that I am not asking you or ordering you, but just manipulating my own pawns. I don't know why you have so many opinions, it seems that there is still a need for re-education..."

"Bu-but, isn't this the same as being killed?"

"...Hi- hiii-!" Risuka - as if she was frightened, she let out a small scream that could barely be heard. After all, she is "shadow stitched" so she can't move at all, but - if she could move, she would have been cowering with her head in her hands.

"I-i u-un-understand!" I g-get it n-n-now.! So I will d-do it. I will do it for sure. I will do as Kizutaka tells me to." Risuka said to me in frantic desperation. Or rather, it's more like she's saying that to herself "Th-th-th-that, that way of talking... that way of talking... please don't be nasty to Risuka. I don't like it — Why do you say that? ... i-it's too, too, too, too much! Just, just, even if you don't say that, I, I, and I will be obedient! I was just a little scared... you talk as... as, if you, you, and you would have been done without me... no, no, without my power, you, you, and you can't do anything at all... but, but you treating me like this... too much, too much, too much...why do you say that kind of thing..."

“I am sorry, I lost my words.”

I simply apologized to Risuka, even if some thoughtless remarks were included in her outbursts, I decided to ignore those words, out of the kindness of my heart. Although I don't think I have done anything wrong, however, it was necessary to apologize in order to stabilize her. But... Risuka really talked too much, I don't remember her talking back all these times until now. And because of that I feel sick.

"Hey, hey, what are you talking about? Is this your way of begging for mercy? Hahaha, no way! You have the obligation to beg for mercy, but I also have the right to refuse! That's it, there is no room for negotiation!"

"You are mistaken It's..." Risuka's tone was extremely painful, "Besides, I don't know how to hurt myself unless I use a utility knife.... It's all just as painful as it is for ordinary people.... Hurting yourself is totally different from having others hurt you.... No magician would ever do this kind of thing.... It's definitely not a cultural difference.... So... why... why do I have to do this kind of thing..."

“What are you trying to say, Risuka-chan, Risuka-chan Risuka-chan? Huh? What are you even going to do?”

“Suicide.”

Risuka said this, and then—

“Ah—”

She opened her mouth wide--

“--unngh!” She bit her tongue off!

“You, you, you, you!” Kagetani was totally taken aback. The color drained from his face, “You, you are crazy! I can't believe it, you, you actually bit off your own tongue! Doesn't it hurt? AAAhhh- There is no tongue. Are you really just a little girl!!!??”

“It's just suicide, didn't you hear her just now?”

I don't think there is a need for an explanation, right? I can't move my body, and explaining to everyone in this funny posture will surely provoke a burst of laughter, so... forget it! The little tip of the tongue fell on Risuka's feet, and it looked so cute, as if it were a living object. At this moment, the tip of the tongue began to melt into a pool of blood. As for the rest of Risuka's

body... well, she seemed to follow my instructions to the very last detail, she closed her lips tightly to prevent the blood from flowing out. I'm glad I couldn't see her face. She must have looked terrible.

“Hii, hiii, hiiii, hiiii!” And.....Kagetani, who had to look at that figure of Risuka from the front, let out a voice that sounded like he was in a panic. “No, stop, stop, don't change - don't change!”

“Once the arrow is fixed, you can not rely on your own will to move the body. In this case, “suicide” would be generally impossible, but your magic has a flaw, Kagetani, that is the ability to “talk.” Ignoring Kagetani’s panic, I’m explaining myself. After all, I have to finish the explanation before Risuka’s “degeneration” is completed. “Time” is running out. “Since I have the ability to ‘speak’, it means the upper and lower jaws, lips, teeth, and the tongue all retain freedom of movement. So—” The conclusion is ready, “Of course you can bite your tongue and kill yourself.”

“This, this, this— “

“And the amount of bleeding from biting the tip of the tongue is definitely several times that of a cut wrist. Since you know Risuka’s father, you should also know that her source of magic is “blood”, the only reason he assigned you, was just so you could prevent her from doing something like that.”

We are indeed ‘fixed’, but theoretically speaking, the blood flowing out of the body should not be within the ‘fixed’ range. Since your aim is to ‘fix us alive’, it is impossible to stop the blood flow in the body, which is why my elbows are still bleeding... well... I feel a bit dizzy. Basically the ‘cannot move’ aspect does not mean we ‘cannot take any actions’, it only restricts certain actions. Of course, the reflexes are also restricted to a certain extent, but they are not really completely ‘fixed’, so while Risuka can't ‘omit’, you can still breathe, blink, and your heart keeps beating. Kagetani Hebiyuki, your biggest failure lies in your own gaps. Today's failure is your own quirk. Keep on flowing, keep on flowing, Risuka’s huge amount of blood could not be contained in the body"

Even standing behind, I could clearly see that Risuka’s hands and feet had become as red as a pig’s liver. After a few seconds, her body suddenly swelled like a balloon, and kept swelling until it surpassed the swelling limit-

-

And , It exploded.

Risuka's small body exploded into pieces, and the oversized cocked hat was thrown into the air by the explosive pressure. The empty room was suddenly dyed red - bright red, dark red, and even the red jacket of Kagetani Hebiyuki was submerged in this red tide. The red ceiling, the red floor, the red walls, and the red windows. Risuka's body—strictly speaking, it can't be called a "body" anymore—has been out of shape for a long time. It doesn't even look like it belonged to a human anymore. The "Shadow Stitching" on my body was also lifted up at this time, because the large amount of blood in Risuka's body had long since swept away the arrow that pierced my shadow. Yes, this was also a part of my plan - the final trump card. The whole room has turned into a sea of blood, Risuka's blood still flowing, I can't estimate how many gallons of blood there are. The room is full of blood's unique slimy, shiny, and rust-like smell. If Kagetani is called the "Kingdom of Shadows," the scene at the moment can only be described as the "Kingdom of Blood". The main axis of this plan is magic power against magic power—but it is not Risuka's magic power, but the magic power of Mizukura Shingo.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhh”

Kagetani Hebiyuki moved again, but instead of shooting an arrow, he turned and fled - after all, Risuka had already turned into liquid, and don't forget that liquid has no shadow. Yes, he knows it well. He knows Mizukura Shingo, so he certainly knows what will happen next and how he will end up. So the only thing he can do now is to run away. It's really your fault, Kagetani Hebiyuki, that no matter how much magic power you have, your bad taste made its way into your "shadow stitch" and that's your downfall. And I - I won't allow you to escape.

As soon as Kagetani took a step, his body stopped moving -- no, I should say that his actions were blocked by me. I pulled off the arrow on my left wrist, aimed at the shadow of Kagetani Hebiyuki and shot it out. To be honest, I am very worried that the pain in my right wrist will make me lose consciousness. To his detriment, the strike zone of his target is very large, no matter which part of the shadow is hit. Fortunately, my father used to take me to shoot darts. Basically, the focus of shooting darts is not physical strength, but focus. But I am ashamed, if I want to score, I'm still far behind my father.

“Uu uuug uuuh?”

The "fixed" Kagetani Hebiyuki was full of fears, but his body couldn't even tremble, only being able to let out a constant scream.

“Don't be like this, 'Kingdom of Shadows', this is too interesting, you have to at least watch it all to the end.”

I pull out the arrow in my right arm and then turn to Kagetani and say my words of victory.

"I know you like little girls, but mature women are better, you know"

"Wh-what?"

There is a voice - and the room is filled with the sound of a spell. The magic that no one can do anything about - the magic that begins now begins. It is what it is, and this is the inevitable - the difference in magnitude, if you will. The horrified Kagetani could only open his mouth wide, he couldn't even scream, further proving his fear of the magic that was about to be activated.

"Nonkiri, Nonkiri, Magna Ado, Loikis Rokislow, Los Casscaru, Nonkiri, Nonkiri, Makena, Loikis Rokislow, Losca Siskalu, Masak, Masak, Kajklina, Lu, Leochi, Lisona, Loyd, Maid, Kanakoy, Kakakaki, Kakakaki, Namoma, Namonaki, Doikagu, Marus, Marus, Namomei, Namomei — —"

"Nyarula!"

With that, "her" right arm emerged from the sea of blood, and the blood in the room immediately gathered around the right arm. The blood on the walls, ceiling, windows, and floor also rushed towards the right arm as if they had their own will. Yes, blood does have its own will, because every drop of blood in the house represents "her", that is, Mizukura Risuka.

"Aha-ha ha ha ha!"

"She" completed her body in a burst of laughter. Red hair, red pupils, red tights, utility knife hanging around the waist, sexy high heels, showing a lot of skin, slim body, slender limbs. Finally, she hooked up the hat that fell to the ground with her toes and put it directly on her head.

"Long time no see - no, should I be saying, sorry to keep you waiting?! I wonder if you like the nightly adult appearance of the magical girl Mizakura Risuka? I am beautiful, I am beautiful, I am beautiful, very good, good, good! Love, Justice, and machine guns! The charm of adults! Hahahahaha! It's so funny, Risuka-nee-san is really funny! Uh-huh! Oh, dear, dear. I've got a funny voice again. This is ruining it."

"You bit off your own tongue after all, which is why your vocal cords are defective." I explained to Risuka. Hmm... I always feel that Risuka looks a little different from her previous adult transformations; she seems to be a bit too tall. Although the future will change, and every "transformation" or "growth" of Risuka will affect her future personality to varying degrees, this

time the gap seems to exceed the acceptable range. However, no matter how big the gap is, Risuka's warlike nature will still not change, meaning that she will never become a polite and virtuous person after she grows up.

"I won't share the blood with you this time. But having said that, if I don't get treatment soon, I'm likely to lose blood and die. I beg you to find a way. Please, I can't stand the pain. "

"What, Kizutaka, dying of blood loss? That would be really really reaaaally bad. Kizutaka is a delicious boy after all, I can't let you die on me like this, I have to find a way to save you, if I have to say something. Um... It's okay, this little injury couldn't kill anyone."

Risuka completely ignored the existence of Kagetani, walked towards me, and then started from the left hand, biting my wound – but she did not suck my blood like a vampire, instead infusing her blood into my body. After she let go, the wound on my left wrist had healed. Risuka immediately performed the same treatment for my right hand. The lost blood is certainly not recoverable, but at least my physical body had recovered – in short, "recovery" uses the blood of the wound as a catalyst to "attach" , And then let my "time" move forward or backward.

"Hmm..why don't you thank your beautiful nee-san?"

"Thank you very much."

I casually said thank you, and then turned my back to Risuka. To be honest, I'm a little afraid of Risuka, when she looks like an adult. In addition to not knowing how to get along with her when she grows up, the 27-year-old can manipulate her huge magic power as she wishes. In other words, she's uncontrollable. The Risuka in front of me right now is the "future image" that makes me feel the most anxious amongst all her adult forms I've seen. Perhaps the previous threat was actually a big, unnecessary mistake. I really don't know what impact that mistake had on her future, fate, and "time".

"Let me remind you, the pig man standing there is your enemy. I'll leave him to you. I'm going to the second floor now to save Ariga Orié."

"Uh, uh uh uh? Why don't you save that for later? Just stay and enjoy my magic show?"

"No", I have no interest in watching his perverted death. I looked at Hebiyuki. Anyway, he is self-inflicted... "Ah, yes yes yes! Let me remind you, this guy is called Kagetani Hebiyuki. He seems to know your father very well. You might as well interrogate and handcuff him before you start. I wondered how powerful a person with five titles would be, but he was really

disappointing. He tried to torture you using the shadow stitching method, so you can return the favour.”

“Huh, really eh? I hate it!”

Risuka gazes at Kagetani, whirling his rugged body. The breathless sound of Kagetani could be heard. You probably don't need "shadow stitching" anymore. If you've set up this far, you'll soon realize that you're defeated by a "witch" before the overwhelming disparity. When you are dealt with it, you lose. Well, at the very least, you can fully experience the future of death , "Kingdom of Shadows". *[I don't really understand this, check the raws so we can figure out how to reword]*

“I leave this all to you.”

Just as I was about to leave the room.

“Wait a sec, Kizutaka-chan!”

Those words stopped me, as she drew the utility knife from her waist.

“You mean that in the name of inquiring about the whereabouts of my father, I am allowed to torture this guy who is unable to move and resist, while he begs and wails? And no matter what I do to him, he will not resist?”

“Surely, it's all right. Why, you don't like it?”

I turned my head and saw Risuka's mouth with a small smile.

“— —Of course I like it, I love it to death .”

★★

It didn't take much time to climb the stairs to the second floor - to find the room that was 'fixed' for Orie Ariga - or in other words, the room where she was held captive after her abduction. There were two rooms on the floor, I opened the door to the first one. And there she was, the “fixed” Ariga Orie. It wasn't a coincidence to find her there, since that was the only room with the lights on. There had been three days, some days and nights, some sunny and some rainy, and the light had probably been left on. Or rather, the shutters were closed. It's just a minimum of work to prevent the neighbors from finding out about the kidnapping and confinement.

“Ah..ahhh Kugi-kun!!?”

She saw me, she hurriedly asked for help, but her voice was hoarse and distressing. She probably hadn't had a single drop of water in these three days! The person in front of me is indeed the Ariga Orié I know. Although her eyes are exhausted, there is a bright light in her pupils. The fluorescent lamp hung on the ceiling cast her shadow on the ground, an arrow was wholly inside the black shadow, and there was a sofa not far away. If you guessed it correctly, the Kage-tani used to sit on this sofa and enjoy the Ariga Orié that he "fixed" in his spare time. Just imagining that kind of picture is disgusting.

"Ku-ku-ku-Kugi kun, pull up, pull up that arrow!" she said desperately to me, quite like an old lady, "I, I don't understand what it is, it seems to be 'magic' - maybe you don't believe it, but he really is... really from Nagasaki, from the other side of the 'castle gate'. He put me-uh. How should I say — I don't know what I'm talking about, anyway it's a very strange spell —"

Even though her explanation was not satisfactory, even to the point of fragmentation, she still knew her situation very well. This girl really isn't simple, she is far more intelligent than I had imagined. She not only accepted the facts that contradicted existing knowledge, but also developed a set of self-adaptation methods, which is not easy. "Adaptation" - perhaps this is where humans surpass other creatures!

"I thought your eyes were covered, maybe you were handcuffed and tied up with twine. Don't kidnappers butcher people they tie up like that?"

"Don't, don't say it, Kugi-kun."

"Okay, okay, I won't say it. Don't worry, I will let you be free right away." I stretched out my right hand and easily pulled up the arrow pierced in the shadow.

"Okay, you can move now, Look."

"Ah!"

Orié's knees softened and sat down on the ground. It's really embarrassing for her. She must have maintained a standing position for the past three days; it's no wonder that her legs are weak. No matter how smart and temperant the eldest daughter is, she is only a fifth grade girl after all.

"I-am I saved...?"

"You seem to be, congratulations."

"...Are you really here to just save me?"

“What do you think?”

“Because...” After hesitating for a while, Ariga continued to speak.

“Because, I always feel that you are not an ordinary person...”

“Really? That's a coincidence, I feel the same for you.”

Now this feeling is more certain. Even if what she discovered is not my true nature, but an external illusion, at least she has a preliminary understanding of me. I didn't expect that a school full of wastes could find a friend. It seems that going to school is really not a bad thing. “Um... just take it as me coming here just to save you.”

“Really? That's great.” she smiled shyly, I didn't know what she was happy about. “What should I say for Kugi-kun... I am a little shocked now, but you are really for me... ..Thank you —”

The voice in Ariga Orie stopped there and it stopped forever. No one knows what she wanted to say, or at least I don't want to, and I'm not interested in knowing, anyway, her voice just cut off, it stopped forever. If she can continue to speak after all that with an arrow stuck deep into her throat, I am sure that she is definitely not a human being.

“Hm. If my arm has fully recovered - can you control it with this level of accuracy? No, before that, the distance was too close. This is a good distance, even a pig can hit it,” I confirmed aloud. “I'm sorry, Ariga-san - I really wanted to help you, but I didn't want you to know about my ambitions and all that stuff about magic when you're still so immature and incomplete.”

I expected her to be blindfolded, and even thought that her mental condition would be very weak. As expected, the pervert cannot be trusted, his way of doing things is full of flaws. No matter how strong his magic power is, whether he has five or ten titles, as long as he is a degenerate, he can't be expected to have useful thoughts.

I now feel I should have stayed back at the first floor to witness that pervert's death, but now it seems that it was indeed the right choice to go to the second floor first. Should this be called scheming? Cautiousness? In any case, humility is definitely an indispensable element for success. It's proof that a person with a purpose is indispensable..... But it's very, very disappointing, a shame, a shame, Ariga Orie. It's a shame, it's too bad. Why do things happen in the world that are not in their own way? If things hadn't turned out this way, you would have even succeeded Kaede. What bad luck, not so lucky. You'll be able to find a lot more than just a few of them. It's called

instant death. I'm sure she was physically and mentally quite weak. I walked up to her and gently closed her eyelids. I thought about kissing her goodbye, but I didn't want to do that to a dead body; it would have been weird.

“Kizutaka, where are you?”

At this time, the door behind me opened and Risuka rushed in. I turned around and saw that she had returned to her appearance as a little girl. One minute must have passed. I'm sure she must have gotten some critical info from Kagetani in that one minute – but Risuka didn't even allow me to ask her about it.

“Is Ariga-san safe!?”

She repeated her own question, “She’s safe, right?”

“Well, we were too late,” I stepped aside so as to allow Risuka to view the body. “By the time I had arrived, she was already dead. She was killed by Kagetani.”

“...What?” Risuka rushed to Orié’s side and knelt on the ground to confirm it herself. She really doesn’t believe me, huh.

“No, it’s impossible... For Kagetani Hebiyuki, it should have been against his personal rules to hurt the girl...”

“You see how he attacked me just now? Basically, he is just an unprincipled lowlife of a creature, you can’t expect him to follow such nominal rules.

“If you knew this before, you shouldn't have rung the doorbell. When he saw you at the door, he naturally decided to dispose of the bait that had lost its use.

“And you can see the results of your actions”, I'm not forgetting to add bitterly: “That pervert actually succeeded. It's disgusting.”

“...uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...”

And then Risuka... Risuka Mizukura...

“U-ahhhhhh!”

Clinging to Orié Ariga, she clung to her – and cried out.

“It's my fault – it's my fault! I didn't mean to drag you into this... because of me... because of me! Ariga-san....Ariga-san, Ariga-san!”

“.....”

Even her tears are red, I didn't know that until now. She burst into tears, completely ignoring my existence, repeating “It is my fault, my fault, and my fault.”

Is this her human side? I can guarantee Risuka's grief has absolutely nothing to do with justice or ethics, she just cries because she's sad; she vents her inner grief by crying. Her red teardrops made her feel godly, even though it is not the time to say this, I can't help but sigh inwardly: Red is indeed Risuka's color and Risuka's alone.

“Risuka—this kind of thing...” I wanted to comfort her but I changed my mind.

“...That's true. If you followed my instructions immediately, maybe this wouldn't have happened. This kind of thing, at least there would have been some time possible to save her.”

“Uuuuuuuuu--” Risuka shook her whole body, and wailed even louder than before. A mere shout; no language at all.

But this is really a big joke. If Kagetani really killed Ariga Ori before the battle, even if Risuka had executed my instructions right away, Ariga Ori's life could not be saved, not to mention the error of a few too many words. Not a fatal mistake. The appearance of the matter is far from the truth, and people with at least a little brain can see the flaws at once. It is a pity that Risuka can't even figure out such a simple truth. Forget it, it's better to treat this as a punishment for not being loyal to me!

“I'll be waiting for you on the first floor.”

After this lesson, maybe Risuka will become more obedient! But to be honest, I don't want to face her inexplicable sadness (I don't have Kagetani's fetishes), so I don't care if she hears it or not, I walked out of the room, down the stairs, returning to the former room where the battle with Kagetani occurred. Except for the densely packed small holes on the floor, this room is quite chic. It is very clean and there is no trace of dust or dead bodies. But a jacket fell off the wall—yes, it was the red jacket Kagetani wore. Maybe the adult Risuka was just a bit confused so she forgot to dispose of the jacket. No, she must have left this jacket on purpose. I walked to the wall and picked up the jacket on the floor to take a look. I was right.

There were a lot of arrows hidden in the jacket. Ten...No, thirteen. If you count the one in my right hand, there are a total of fourteen unused arrows. Hmm... This is a gift from the gods, and I can't help but thank Risuka, who is going to be a little crazy in the future. These arrows are filled with Magic Sigils. Even ordinary people like me can use them to launch Magic Sigils. Don't forget that I used the same technique to deal with Kagetani. The only shortcoming is that the number of Magic Sigils is limited, but in future battles, these "arrows" will surely become my greatest combat power.

“But... still feels weird.”

Although this action has achieved some gains, it also left some regrets behind. I always feel that something is wrong. Neither the result nor the process can be said to have more advantages than disadvantages...

Strictly speaking, there are definitely advantages, but... the final development is too unnatural. That's right, it's too unreasonable. The tongue-in-cheek strategy against "Kingdom of Shadow" seems to have been a thing of the past now.

The whole thing is basically a game, similar to a puzzle or a mystery game, and the conditions for victory are met and it feels like we have accepted the test arranged by someone. At this level, I didn't discover the flaws in Kagetani at all. I just found the pre-arranged "secret passage"; even the part where the treasure was obtained after the battle was filled with a strong drama. If this is really a video game, who would the GM be? There is no need to think deeply, the answer is actually obvious.

If my guess is right, my encounter with the miraculous Mizukura Shingo, is probably just around the corner. We have activated the switch today and are completely past the point of no return. Risuka's purpose is to find the whereabouts of Mizukura Shingo, that is, to find her father; but after finding that, she doesn't seem to have anything in mind. If possible, of course, I really want to use Risuka and Mizukura Shino as my pawns. Even if this wish ends up being unfulfilled, I at least have to defeat him first; that's something that has to be done.

After this incident, I believe I have a better understanding of his daughter as well as about the "Ark Project" (a name ripped off directly from the Bible, it really is a name without any originality). Kagetani was at best just a pawn of Mizukura Shingo. Basically, I doubt how much inside info this small character knows; but if things have come to this point, it would soon be time for me and Risuka to take the initiative. Although it is inconvenient to take action when all the pieces haven't yet fallen into their proper places, I will just take it up as a challenge to overcome.

If the enemy really lays a trap in front of me, I would just need to jump in and break the trap. This kind of exciting gameplay will not be boring. I am definitely not pursuing my dreams just because I am bored, nor am I biased enough to think that negating my boredom can enrich my life. Although I don't like to seek pleasure by taking risks, it's still too boring of a path to pursue. So I put on the relic Kagetani Hebiyuki - the "Kingdom of Shadows" - left behind. The jacket is obviously larger than mine, it looks more like a windbreaker on me, but to be honest, it's quite comfortable to wear. Is this a design that prioritizes comfortemphasizes the inner clothes? I kind of like this logic, good. Just accept it. In order to think about how to move forward, I should go back to the second floor again and try to ask Risuka what information she got out of Kagetani, and think about it by the way. What to do with Orie's corpse... Forget it, Risuka must be still shedding red tears in mourning, so I guess it's better to leave her as she is. Hmm.... To be honest, although the death of Ariga Orie was inevitable and the only option, it feels really bad to kill an innocent girl, especially if it's someone I knownot to mention that the other person is someone I know, and it is me. Paying attention to the goal for a long time, this time makes me feel extremely heavy. My weakness is being emotional, and I have to find a way to overcome it. The same is for killing people. My motive is different from the perverted Kagetani. If I doubt my legitimacy, how is it different from that pervert? If you lose the justice to defend and confidence in the legitimacy of your beliefs, you will inevitably lose your personality. How can I face Mizukura Shingo in this way? Only people who are righteous and confident in their mission can compete with gods or demons. I will never forget the confusion that this incident has brought me. If you don't consolidate your faith, it will definitely become a fatal bane. But having said that, consolidating faith is not just talking about it, you have to start from the foundations.... It seems that I will have many opportunities to see Risuka shed red tears in the future.

My mood is really not getting any better.

I don't really like wet and sticky things.

Shadow Kingdom is Q.E.D.

Episode Three: Evil in Disguise.

If someone were to ask me how I managed to win over Mizukura Risuka, the Red Witch of Time, I honestly wouldn't know how to answer. The reason is simple. I don't even know which of my lines touched her heart. If I were to try to think about this problem that I had never thought of before, I only remember that I spent more than five hours in total, exhausting all the vocabulary I have learned in my life, and finally let Risuka feel my sincerity. As for what I said to her, I'm sorry, I said too much to her at the time, and I really don't have any memory at all. Now everyone knows how desperate I was then? In order to use the magician whom I met for the first time in my life as "the Red Witch of Time", and make her the first chess piece played by me for Kugi Kizutaka, I really suffered. Yes, she was the first magician and first witch I met. Pretty red hair with charming red eyes, dotted with moist plump red lips, wearing an oversized hat on her head, and a box-cutter knife in her hand. With a slender pink neck, slender arms, slender waist, and slender calves, Risuka gently shook the handcuffs of her right hand, playing with the blade of the utility knife with her small and exquisite fingers, and then nodded at me when she said ungrammatically. Yes, she agreed. Risuka's personality is very unique, and her complete contradiction is the best portrayal of her. She looks stable, but she is easily impulsive. Perhaps in her introverted personality, the other side of emotions is hidden! This is Mizukura Risuka, "The Red Witch of Time." But at the beginning, I should have been vigilant and suspicious about Risuka. After all, I may have been the who who asked for her, but from her point of view, I may not be what she asked for. However, over the past year, we both have acted together for the same purpose. Sometimes I helped her and sometimes she helped me in return. After so many difficulties, I gradually relaxed my guard. A common purpose often makes two strangers close comrades-in-arms. Although I sneered at this irritating emotional expression, before I knew it, I also said, "Mizukura Risuka is next to Kugi Kizutaka" "It is equivalent to "Kugi Kizutaka is next to Mizukura" Of course, this is likely to be my own passion, and I may also make the most stupid mistake. In any case, Risuka did not hesitate to cross the "city gate" and come to Saga Prefecture, which is equivalent to an overseas country. Her ultimate goal is to "find her father". As for the process, I have long forgotten it. Yes, to put it simply, I know I made mistakes that I shouldn't have made. I arrived. How did I convince Risuka at the end, how did I make her obey me? For me, this is definitely a memorable starting point. Those were definitely some memorable five hours, but I have completely forgotten them. Is it because of excessive self-confidence? Or is it a temporary loss of control caused by too much gain and loss? Of course, I do not feel regret for this. The word "repentance" holds meaning to the being

named Kugi Kizutaka. Over the past year or so, Risuka and I have achieved the desired goal, which was to catch the tail of Mizukura Shingo , via the “Shadow”. The efficiency of ordinary people is not so good. If only Risuka is alone, I am afraid that it will not be achieved in ten years, and even I cannot be so smooth—of course, the latter is a humble performance. After all, I don’t know how to use magic, and I don’t have much strength. That’s why I need Risuka. Yes, the causal relationship must be clarified and the order must not be reversed. The need for Risuka is just a means to an end, and has nothing to do with my own conditions. For me, need is an inevitable condition. Compared with Risuka, my existence is of course also inevitable. But thinking about it, the inevitability of the latter doesn’t seem so high, but it’s strange to say that Risuka will accept my proposal readily and let me become her “guide” in a strange country. Maybe Risuka needs me to act as her hands and feet! I think. I regard Risuka as a “pawn” to achieve the goal, but on the other hand, does Risuka treat me as a “pawn” to achieve the goal? Moreover, Risuka was the first magician I met, but I was not the first “local” Risuka met, so she really had no need to regard me as a “guide”. At least when I tried to persuade her to accept the proposal, there shouldn’t have been any incentive for her in the process.

“Is she used to my existence?”

Yes, how else would she say that I am her “friend”? Right, right, right, at the end of the subway incident. Friend. A friend. It’s so boring, it’s simply stupid, and honestly I don’t care at all. But on second thought, it doesn’t hurt. It doesn’t matter what Risuka considers me. What’s important is that she is nothing but a tool and a pawn in my mind, so I don’t care about my image in her mind at all, I haven’t even thought about it. Basically, as long as she treats me as a trustworthy partner and loyal friend, I don’t care about everything else. Anyway, it was the same pattern all the way before, and there were no major problems in the middle, and it would be a good idea to continue to maintain it.

“I didn't mean to pull a bad move, though.”

Even though there was no irony, I couldn’t help but stop. The shoes on my feet were newly bought, and they were not very comfortable to wear. The unique awkwardness of the new shoes came from the soles of my feet. This pair of shoes is a popular style nowadays. The laces are wide and flat, making it extremely difficult to tie up. The design that runs through the tongue from the toe is even more weird. However, it is necessary to cater to most people’s tastes, so yesterday I begged my father to buy a pair for me. I honestly don’t understand why those incompetent children in school like to wear this kind of shoes no, strictly speaking, I don't understand it at all. Just analyze their behavior patterns and you can quickly find out the answer. I just don’t want to spend this effort, and their behavior patterns are not worthy of my

understanding. The fact that Ariga Orié's bizarre disappearance is right in front of us, but other people in the school can still live their daily lives in a muddle-headed manner. But Risuka Mizukura. How she thinks and what she's been thinking about. How she thinks about me and what she has been thinking about me. I'm sure there are people who would say that I've been too careless about that, given the current situation. Even though it may seem that way, in this case, I may have no choice but to give up.

“Give up, huh....., that's a word I don't like.”

I took out my wallet from my school bag and found myself standing in front of the vending machine next to the old building. It happened when I felt that the water intake was insufficient. One hundred and twenty yen. It's pretty windy today, and it's a bit difficult to open and close the schoolbag. I looked up at the sign on the exterior wall of the building directly above the vending machine (with a few meaningless words written on it, and I couldn't tell which company it was). The strong wind shook. Insert two coins into the coin slot, and the product selection light will light up immediately. The drinks in the vending machine are divided into three columns, the upper, the middle and the lower. The half-liter PET bottle drinks in the bottom row far exceed the stomach capacity of my primary school student, so they are directly eliminated. Then...what should I drink? The coffee seems good. Canned coffee is different from coffee brewed by Chamberlain, and it is still within the acceptable range of my taste buds. So I turned my gaze to the coffee drink on the top floor, only to find that I had to stand up on my toes to get the top button. Is the little canned coffee worth my tiptoe? Well, this is a complicated question, and it's about my self-esteem. If I can't press the button even if I stand on tiptoe, even if this situation is only one in ten million possibilities, wouldn't it make me feel the humiliation of losers? And this is not a question of loss and losslessness. Once this situation is established, my self-esteem will surely turn into fragments and scattered on the ground in an instant. But again, once a man has made a decision, how can he easily shrink back? I don't know who said that withdrawal is synonymous with failure. On the surface, I seem to have avoided the result of failure, but in my bones, I am no different from a failure. Unable to strengthen one's determination, this is called submission, this is called failure. So I gritted my teeth and stretched my right hand to the button of the target.

“...Ah!”

When I said it was too late and then quickly, a finger pushed the button next to the can of coffee I was aiming for, as if it were going over my head. With a bang, the can fell into the outlet. There was nothing I could do to stop it now. I heard the sound of the change falling out of the can eight times. I could tell by the sound, eight 10-yen coins. Of course, it can't be any other coin that falls out of the change that contains two 100-yen coins. I didn't - I

didn't turn around. I didn't need to turn around. The bandage wrapped around the wrist was a familiar one – a wrist that was wrapped in a bandage.

“...The customs in Nagasaki Prefecture may be different.” I lowered my voice. “But at the other end of the “City Gate”, it is very impolite to take things over other people’s heads.”

“—That’s really embarrassing.” A reply came from the person with the bandaged hand, coaxing the child’s tone. “I was just worried that you were not high enough to press the button. According to my visual observation, you definitely cannot press it 120%. That’s why I kindly offered to help you Kugi Kizutaka-kun”

“Your assistance is extremely superfluous.”

“No need to be so unsociable. Are you like this to everyone you meet?”

“...You have been tailing me?” I didn’t want to look back or answer questions, so I took the drink directly from the vending machine. Take out. This can contains coffee as well, but this the kind that is devoid of sugar . “Compensate me. This wasn’t what I wanted, what I wanted was the one next to this.”

“It stands to reason that I should apologize to you, but unfortunately this was something premeditated crime. Of course, if you want me to compensate anyway, little I didn't take a small can of coffee in my eyes, just buy another can. In fact, I knew you wanted the coffee next to you, but the canned coffee is basically sugar water, so don't drink this kind of coffee. Since you want to drink, choosing sugar-free coffee is king.”

“Mind your own business!”

I turned around and threw the black unsweetened coffee can, as hard as I could, right in his face. I thought it was a 50-50 proposition, but the guy caught the black unsweetened can of coffee I threw at him easily.

“No need to pay for it. Think of that as a treat from my side”

“Really? I’m so grateful, that’s so generous of you Kugi Kizutaka. I’ve grown up this way, and it’s the first time someone asked me to drink coffee!”

Bandaged Mizukura Haki smiled lightly, and pulled the tab of the tin can. “Now then Kugi Kizutaka-kun, if you are in a panic right now, do you want to chat with me? I wanted to have a talk with you anyways, or rather, if I should say so, I’ve been dying to have a talk with you .”



I couldn't get in touch with Risuka Mizukura anymore. It's not that kind of thing, though, since Risuka is a pretty truant person to begin with and rarely comes to school, so it's only natural that she can't be seen at school – but that's not the point, of course. Before, I called Risuka on the grounds of a certain need-in short, asking for advice, but I couldn't find anyone. No matter how many calls I made, all I got was Chamberlain's answer with the standard reason "Miss is currently unwell". Even if I dialed the exclusive phone in Risuka's room, the other end of the microphone always had the same ringtone. At first, I didn't take it to heart, but after the same situation lasted for a while, I couldn't help but finally visited Risuka's house (the exterior is windmill-shaped, the first floor is a coffee shop, and the second floor is Risuka's residence), the result was simply blocked by every effort. Although Chamberlain's tone was polite, he put on a tough attitude that was not negotiable, he was truly a dedicated butler. At that time, I felt that things didn't seem to have to be forced in, so I retreated and left on my own; but the same situation lasted for three more days, and it was already the tenth day since Risuka's loss of contact. I have to feel something strange-well, I admit I am a little worried. So I secretly made up my mind that even if I am burning with a fever of 40 degree Celsius, I must see Risuka today. After finally waiting until school is over, my classmates and I made a few perfunctory remarks and I embarked on the journey to the coffee shop for the fourth time.

"Still giving me trouble as always."

I can't deny that there was a hint of irritation in my voice as I muttered to myself along the way. When Risuka wants to see me, she can use the technique of "omission" to achieve her goal. I don't understand magic but I have the only option of "walking" (but I don't want Risuka to be around all the time. Therefore, this method is limited to use in emergencies). However, what I mean by "trouble" here does not refer to these specific trivial matters. To be honest, the cause of Risuka's "physical discomfort" is somewhat clear in my heart. If I guess right, the death of the Kagetani Hebiyuki, known as the "Kingdom of Shadows," and the death of Orie, should be the cause of Risuka's "discomfort". After the Kagetani incident ended, Risuka lost contact, judging from the coincidence in time, it also indirectly proved my inference. At the time of the incident, Risuka shed red tears, as if she was blaming herself for failing to save Ariga Orie. She sympathized with the loss of life in Ariga Orie, and unreservedly expressed her grief. I have never seen Risuka, whose true feelings are revealed. The impact of Ariga Orie's death on her is beyond my imagination, and I never expected that the shock at that time would cause her uncomfortable sequelae. In addition when I left the scene to rescue Ariga Orie, Risuka should have asked a lot of information about

Mizukura Shingo from Kagetani and the details of the so-called “Ark Project.” I also looked for I don’t have the opportunity to ask Risuka for more details (this was the important thing that I mentioned before and eager to ask). It is reasonable to say that this is not terrible information, and even if Risuka’s “discomfort” is really serious, it should not be at the point where she can’t speak, her loss of contact is really unreasonable. But then again, I can basically understand that the death of Ariga Oriie has caused a considerable blow to Risuka (after all, I also have this kind of emotional expression as a human), so I have always been tolerant; but my patience is also limited. Even if I am a far-sighted and calm prophet, I don’t think there is any meaning in waiting for the taste. Today, no matter what Chamberlain said, I will rush to the second floor to find someone. And I also conceived a few useful battle plans. If the situation requires, I might have to give Risuka a head start. Basically, I’m not good at inspiring people, but I don’t allow Risuka to become depressed because of the death of a mere mortal. This is the most intolerable place for me.

“Welcome.”

The tag “in business” swayed from side to side with the opening of the automatic door (I still had to step on the floor mat hard), and when I was about to enter the store, an unexpected scene came into my eyes. Almost anticlimatic, if I may say so. Chamberlain stood behind the bar as usual. Sitting on the opposite side was Mizukura Risuka, who had been missing for a long time. She dangled a pair of slender legs on the high chair, seemingly unable to find a point of strength. After realizing my existence, Risuka’s eyes widened with a look of astonishment.

“Ah, Risuka—”

The unexpected scene also made me at a loss. At first, I was still thinking about whether to speak out. After hesitating for half a second, I immediately made up my mind to say hello to Risuka; I didn’t expect that before I finished speaking, she jumped off the high chair and turned her back. I froze for a moment, and then realized that she wanted to escape the scene. Before she took the first step—

“Stop, Risuka !”

The threat of voice is sometimes more useful than actual action. I saw Risuka stop and sit back up high unwillingly. As far as the height of the chair is concerned, “climbing” may be more appropriate than “sitting”. Seeing Risuka’s every move, I nodded in satisfaction, left the automatic door and took the seat on Risuka’s right, then swung the bag on my back to the empty space next to her, staring at her intently. Risuka looked down at the desktop in front of her, did not look up at me, honestly this attitude made me very

unhappy. Although Risuka's face is not very healthy, it is not yet "physically unwell".

"...Kugi-sama."

Chamberlain took the lead in breaking the silence.

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"Um...Well then , for the time being- "

"No need."

Risuka interrupted the order.

"Chamberlain, you go down first."

"But, miss, I'm afraid it's time to move on. It's time for me to go back to my..."

"It's okay, it's okay." Risuka said in a reassured tone. "The concept of time does not pose a problem to me."

"..As you command."

Chamberlain respectfully saluted Risuka , turned to me and said the polite words "I'm not entertained, please forgive me," and disappeared into the wooden door behind the bar. After Chamberlain left, Risuka jumped off the high chair again and turned the sign of "in business" on the automatic door to "in preparation" before returning to her seat.

"You should at least offers guests something to drink, you know?"

"..."

"I'm still pretty tired. Fifth period P.E. was a marathon. I'm sure my legs are full of lactic acid. Yeah, I really am not ready for such a welcome, especially after that competition."

"..."

"Well, that's why it's kind of a last resort for me to be served coffee here. I think that if you added orange juice to the menu, this place would be a little more prosperous."

"..."

Risuka remained silent, without saying a word. This reaction made the atmosphere on the scene suddenly embarrassing. I didn't even think that I didn't even put down my schoolbag, and came to visit her directly after school, and ended up being treated like this. Regardless of what I say, Risuka always doesn't say a word, even if it is a good-tempered person, it will inevitably feel uncomfortable. This feeling is exactly the same as when I faced those incompetent people at school, the only difference is that I am a little uncomfortable now.

“Risuka? What is it...”

“Ki- Kizutaka, you-”

Risuka finally spoke. The sound of her voice was faint and unreliable, as if she were trembling, mindlessly.

“Kizutaka, you killed Orie-san.”

“...”

It was finally discovered. Basically, as long as you have a little basic logical reasoning ability, you will soon discover the truth of the matter. After all, the excuses I made at the time were too far-fetched and lacked reasonable logic. Moreover, such small facts are not enough, and there is no need to hide them. As long as the time is right, I will naturally inform her. However, all of this is based on an objective standpoint. As one of the parties involved, Risuka will of course look at the whole matter from a subjective standpoint. It stands to reason that the death of Ariga Orie should not be easy to discover for her. The truth is right. But the facts are in front of her. Even though she was emotionally broken and mentally confused at the time, she still calmly smelled the truth hidden under the surface on the second day of the incident. It can only be said that Mizukura Risuka deserves to be. The witch I admire. Her mind is very clear and deserves praise.

“...Answer me.”

“Huh? Ah... well...” I originally wanted to deny it completely, but it was difficult to make up a set of powerful statements in a hurry, and there is no need to deliberately conceal such trivial matters. Consider it for a moment. After that, nodding slowly,

“She knew too many things that shouldn't be known, and I had no choice.”

“ Kizutaka, why?” Risuka stared at the handcuffs of her right hand, as if she refused to accept all this? “Why did you do that?”

“Well...because she knew so much.”

“...” That’s the way it is, this is the real reason Risuka avoids meeting. .
“It was also for the sake of your and my purposes.”

“But!”

Risuka yelled, not letting me continue.

“But I don’t want things to be like this at all!”

“...”

“You don’t understand at all! I came here all the way to prevent this from happening!” For the first time since I entered the door, Risuka opened her bright red eyes and stared at me intently. “Can, can, but you do that kind of thing, how is this, this for me? Goals, goals? That’s just your purpose! I, I don’t have that kind of purpose, don’t pull me with you! “

“Risuka...” The aggressive momentum made me choke on words for a while. “... But if you think about it, we can have today’s results, isn’t it also at the expense of a lot of price? It was not only Orie who died at that time, the enemy at that time, nicknamed “Kingdom of Shadows”, the Kagetani Hebiyuki. He was also a living person.”

“He was different.”

“Why? Because he was a “magician”? Then what about Takamine Koutarou? He was just a normal human.

“... But... they were all “bad guys”.”

“It turns out that you are a moralist. It was unexpected.” I glared back unceremoniously. “Does the “bad guy” deserve to be killed by you? Does the murderer have to die? Maybe this is your mode of thinking, but I can't agree. Whether it's Takamine or Kagetani, whether it's a good guy or a bad guy, come to me. They are all the same. The reason why they have to die is purely because they are obstacles to my goals, and it has nothing to do with their personalities or roles. In this sense, whether it is Takamine Koutarou, Kagetani Hebiyuki or Ariga Orie, they are all the same to me, they are just obstacles. You don’t need or have the right to question my approach.”

“...” Now it's Risuka's turn to remain silent. I saw her brow furrowed and her lips pressed into a straight line. “Ki-Kizutaka has-”

“What is it?”

“Have you done similar things before? Ever since you met me, you've been doing things like that for a long time, even before you met me. Have you been doing this for a long time before you met me, doing and doing things under such a value system?”

“I don't understand what you mean.”

“...was Ariga Ori-san the first of your victims? This is what I want to ask.”

“You are getting pretty good at using the language of outside the ” Perhaps Risuka has been pondering this sentence in her heart for these ten days! In other words, it was not because of Risuka's suspicion, she was pretty sure that I killed the murderer in Ariga Ori. “It's not easy, it's worthy of the witch I admire.”

“A-answer me.” Risuka said while trembling. “Kizutaka, you continually deceived me like this...Ariga Ori-san's case wasn't the first, right?”

“That's right.”

The weak sound of slapping echoed high in the empty shop. The reverberations of the sound remained in my head. It reverberated in my head. The handcuffs on Riska's right arm chirp a little later. I slowly open my eyes, which have reflexively closed, and check on Risuka. I thought that I might have red tears in my eyes again, but that's not the case. But that's not the case, she's staring at me, stoutly. But he had a red face and was breathing heavily. I couldn't seem to find the right words to say. It was the same for me. There are no words. I hadn't expected her to resort to direct and cutting edge violence, and to be honest, I was confused. Of course, I have gone through a fair amount of abuse myself. I don't mean to say that it's the first time I've been hit by a stranger. You're going to be able to find out what you're looking for, and you're going to be able to find it.

“Why, why?”

“...”

“Why, Kizutaka, why!!” Risuka flipped her right hand and planned to greet me on the other cheek. Perhaps she was caught off guard the first time, but she couldn’t succeed the second time. I quickly blocked Risuka’s right hand with my left hand, and then slapped Risuka with the other hand. While Risuka was stunned, I immediately jumped off the high chair and pulled Risuka down by the way, and grabbed her right hand high.

“There's no 'why' or 'how' to do this! I told you, it was for me and Risu's purposes! "Purpose," "Purpose," "Purpose"! That's it, nothing else! Don't be so childish about trying to achieve your goals without sacrificing anything!”

“But, we are children! Whether it is me or you, we are originally children!”

“What the heck. What the heck? Don’t be ridiculous. Didn’t you vow to find your father, Mizukura Shingo? Or was that something you said casually without meaning to? Our “purpose” can’t be any more clear! Our purpose is to”

“It's not my purpose! That's not my purpose! don't link me to you! That's your purpose, you just want to take advantage of me!”

“No, that's not my- ”

“Kizutaka! Why!”

Risuka closed her eyes and shouted.

“Why can't you at least consider my feelings?”

“ Enough .” Risuka’s shout made me raise my right hand, but was grabbed from behind. At first I thought it was a Chamberlain , but he who left the store through the wooden door behind the bar could not grab my hand from behind, the only possibility was other people walking into the store. But I didn’t hear the sound of the automatic door opening. Besides us, there was no third person in the store, otherwise Risuka would not turn the door panel to the “ready” side. The problem is that the physical feeling is not deceiving. My right hand was really caught, so I turned around tremblingly.

“Occasionally quarrels are okay, but girls are not good to fight with their hands—no, it ‘s okay to fight occasionally, but it’s not good to fight with girls.” The opponent is a tall boy with red hair and wearing a rather strange uniform. It doesn’t look like a middle school student, it’s probably a high school student! Whether it’s holding my right hand or a naturally drooping left hand, both hands are tied with a thin layer of bandage, which should be

his biggest feature. The skin is abnormally fair, the eyes are abnormally long, the facial features are also abnormally delicate, and the appearance is very feminine. I saw him grinning, his lips as thin as cicada wings were as red as blood, and even his pupils were red.

“...You are— ”

“Onii-chan!”

Risuka pushed me back, forcibly breaking free and taking a step forward. That’s right, she just rushed into the man’s arms like this, as if to hit him. It would be strange to not be knocked over backwards by the impact of the collision; but the man in uniform absorbed all the impact indifferently, then let go of my right wrist, and his bandaged hands were gentle. Risuka who hugged a pink face and buried her chest.

“Onii-chan! Onii-chan!”

”Hey hey. Risuka this is a bit immodest you know? Your friend is still around after all!” The man turned his eyes to me and smiled politely. “Uh... This is the first time we met, are you a friend of Risuka? The person named Mizukura Haki is me-no, right? My name is Mizukura Haki.”

“...mine’s Kugi Kizutaka.”

After exchanging our names , I suddenly realized. Risuka, who stayed home for three days, why did she go to the coffee shop on the first floor today? Why did Chamberlain mention that the time was almost up? All of this was due to the reason why this was far more important than avoiding meeting me. I chewed on the feeling of being pushed away by Risuka. For some reason, this push seems to hurt me more than the slap just now.

★★★

“Risuka calls me “Onii-chan”, but I am not the son of Shingo-san. He is my uncle, and Risuka and I are actually cousins; but since my father died early , so I was brought up by Uncle Shingo, which is why I and Risuka are like brothers and sisters.” Mizukura Haki Haki drank sugar-free, creamer-free canned black coffee, and said this to me. It was something I hadn’t even asked for.

“I have heard a lot about you from Risuka.”

“Is that so?.” I opened the tab on the can and sipped the canned coffee that I bought for another 120 yen. Of course, these are products with creamer and sugar. “Aren’t you going to accompany Risuka? Her mental state is not very stable. Doesn’t she need someone like you to calm her emotions?”

‘Yeah. I guess that’s why Chamberlain also contacted me - I’m surprised that Risuka went out of the prefecture while I was working on my schoolwork for a bit. She really surprises her onii-chan”

“...You weren’t aware about this?”

“Hmm. Well, I was kept in the dark for most of it. Chamberlin must have decided it was a critical situation. A faithful steward acting on his own. I suppose it was the right thing to do. I’ve never seen him lose himself like that before. Although I’ve always been a spoiled child at the core of my life.”

“A spoiled child”

The wind is getting stronger and stronger, blowing me and Mizukura into messy hair; but we don't care much.

“Actually—” Mizukura Haki looked at me with a downcast look of gloom in his eyes. “I don’t think it’s my responsibility to accompany Risuka . To be honest, it should be your job.”

“Didn’t you witness for yourself that I just quarreled with her? I am starting to wonder if there is something wrong with the circuitry in your head. How can you even draw such a ridiculous conclusion?” I threw the empty coffee can into the trash can next to the vending machine. “You say Risuka told you a lot about me, I think most probably are saying bad things about me, right?”

“Well, it's true that your fighting was a tad bit too flashy , in the end, it was just a childing quarrel. That happens a lot when you're a kid. There's no need to worry about it.”

”Don't talk as if you know it all”

“Your face looks extremely displeased, you know? Moreover, you shouldn’t really be rude to your seniors, especially if you meet them for the first time. Tell me, are you like this for everyone you meet?”

“This lack of courtesy is something that I have inherited from my father . Besides, I have no obligation to hear the complaints of a person I met for the first time.

“Such discourtesy. Although, you may very well be right about that. When you are with a person of my age, it isn’t easy to deal with people. Hence, I just remember to make compromises. In that sense, you’re admirable as well.”

“You don’t seem to be that old yourself.”

“I’m eighteen years old, and I will be graduating out of this school uniform by the end of this year. From your point of view, I might as well be an Ojii-san”

He threw the coffee can into the trash can, probably finished it as well.

“The coffee that Ojiisan drinks is absolutely free of sugar. This is the best proof.”

“You don’t like sweets?”

“Not really. Actually, I love sweets more than anyone else. But my physique tends to gain weight. At your age, I was a chubby boy. I managed to lose weight afterwards, and now I don’t want to get fat again. Going back, of course you have to control your sugar intake.”

“Oh, how come I heard that people in Nagasaki prefecture equate obesity with handsomeness?”

“..... It can’t be You’re a weird kid,” Mizukura Haki looked at me in disbelief. “Was it Risuka who said that?”

“Uh...when I encountered the Kagetani Hebiyuki the other day...” I knew that this matter couldn’t be hidden from him, so I simply divulged the details of the incident. After listening to my narration, Mizukura Haki’s eyes widened, as if even more dismayed.

“...The title of an animal as a person is indeed a sign of respect. After all, animals and plants have a deeper understanding of “magic” than human beings. But this is just a holistic way of thinking. We don’t particularly respect “pigs”. Risuka has clearly misunderstood this animal.”

“Misunderstanding...” As expected. “But Risuka seems to like to watch grand sumo...”

“That’s just her personal preference, and it doesn’t mean that all Nagasaki people like to watch grand sumo. It’s a big misunderstanding, just like those who live in Hokkaido must be good at skiing, and people who live in Kyoto must have red bean cakes as their staple food.”

“ ... ”

It seems Risuka is a freak different from ordinary people.

“Yes, a huge misunderstanding.” Mizukura Hakikura Haki said, assuming airs of importance.

“This is the misunderstanding caused by equating one’s own values with the values of the world. This kind of person has no idea that there is another side of the world that cannot be detected by their senses.” Mizukura smiled, seemingly satisfied with his lines. . “In this sense, Risuka is just a child. You are no exception. Kugi Kizutaka-kun, a “magician” user.”

“ ... ”

“Over this period of time, you and Risuka have teamed up to eliminate many magicians, but don't think for a moment that you know the “Magic Kingdom” just because of this. You don’t know anything, nor is there anything that you can understand.”

“...I wonder about that, ” glaring at Mizukura Haki, I continued, “Why not test it out with you own hands?”

“With my own hands huh? My hands? That is not a bad idea at all, it would be truly fun to try it out but it won’t be necessary. By my standards, I know for certain that you haven’t even seen how terrible magic truly can be, not even once.” Mizukura’s tone was still smooth, not irritated by my provocation. “Perhaps throughout the year, you think you and Risuka have gone through a lot of dangers, and you think you are an old bird who has seen strong winds and waves. This is how you feel.”

“...? “Feel”? “Feeling” huh?”

“Don’t pretend to be stupid anymore, that trick won’t work on me. Or do you yourself know nothing about it? Your body itself emanates the smell of Risuka.”

Risuka’s scent.

“To be more precise, it should be that there is the smell of Risuka in your blood. It may be difficult for ordinary people to detect, but I am a relative of Risuka after all. As long as I pay attention, it’s extremely easy to notice. In your body, I feel the existence of Risuka.”

“ ... ”

That's it, it turns out that this was the solution to the mystery all along. No wonder it has been a long time since I left the cafe, and Mizukura Haki still found me. It turned out that he was not following my trails, so to speak, but rather, he was following the scent of Risuka emanating from my body.

"From here, you can be sure that Risuka once distributed her blood to you, which also means that your life has already been greatly damaged. The experience that resulted from this damage seems to have accumulated over the past year, and perhaps it has been the reason behind your "confidence"."

At this point, Mizukura Haki shook his head with exaggerated grandiosity.

"It's a pity that you have been totally mistaken. You don't even understand the true extents of the horrors of magic. What you have been exposed to this year has just been the tip of the magic"

"...Sorry but,"

I was silent for a while and decided to reply back.

"This is just how I am. My way of thinking won't be altered just because I happened to get involved in some unusual business. It's not like my association with Risuka has led to the awakening of some new kind of self inside of me, you can very well be assured about that. "

"I don't think so. Kugi Kizutaka-kun, you probably don't understand the horror of Risuka? She is the daughter of Mizukura Shingo. I think only mentally abnormal people can dare to slap her on the face."

"...Leave that alone. That's got nothing to do with you."

"It has got something to do with me, Risuka is my sister after all." Mizukura Haki paused. "Or more like existence 'like' a sister, hmm"

"Don't bother correcting those small details. You already seem to have a shady side enough, 'onii-chan' ."

"...Yes, yes, I appreciate this kind of child— No, I really admire this kind of child. You remind me of my past self." Mizukura Haki seemed to frown a bit and then immediately, returned to a cheerful smile. "Kugi Kizutaka-kun, there is something I want to discuss with you."

"What the heck is it? I don't have anything to discuss with you so if you have anything to say, get over it quick."

“I am thinking of bringing Risuka back to Nagasaki. “

” “

”Risuka’s really too naive to even think that she could ever find Shingo-san on her own. He’s the world’s greatest magician, even the entirety of Nagasaki couldn’t find him if they all tried, they may not even be able to find his whereabouts. Although we blood relatives can rely on the power of “blood relationship” to know where he is, we still can’t grasp the exact location. Moreover, Shingo-san must have used “invisibility”. So unless he is willing to show up, no one can find him. Even if by some rare stroke of luck, let’s say Risuka still manages to find him. What then? Shingo-san is no longer something than we can call as a ‘father’ or a relative. He may very well not be a human either at this point.”

“...If that’s how it is, then go on, do whatever you feel like.!” I replied coldly: “If Risuka wants to go back to Nagasaki, you can have her back. I have no plans of restraining her back.

“How cold, isn’t she your friend?”

“She was just my pawn. Now that things have progressed to this point, even without Risuka, I can reach the destination alone. It will take a little longer. To be honest, Risuka is not an easy pawn to control,” Although the rook has a strong ability to move, but with more than 20 rooks squeezed on a small chessboard, this chess game is dull and tasteless.”

“Perhaps the “Queen” metaphor is more appropriate.”

“Then you are her Knight in shining armour huh?”

“I want like to say anything cold like that, but-”

Mizukura Haki’s expression was a bit depressed.

“You really never thought about Risuka’s feelings even for a single moment, did you? .”

“...It wasn’t necessary, One doesn’t need to think about the feelings of chess pieces.” I didn’t want to talk about this issue anymore, so I simply changed the subject. “What did Risuka say? Does she want to go back to Nagasaki Prefecture and Moriyashiki City?”

“ ... ”

“What’s the matter? Risuka and I aren’t even related by blood, you don’t even need to ask for my permission.”

“She doesn’t want to go back.” Mizukura Haki wore a sad face. “This is the first time ever that Risuka has rejected a proposal from me.”

“...Huh.”

“And it seems you anticipated it too, isn’t that right Kugi Kizutaka-kun?”

“Not particularly. But I know how important Mizukura Shingo’s whereabouts are to Risuka, and I understand that she took the risk to cross the city gate and came here to find her father. Now she has spent a lot of effort to achieve her goal. So even if you ask her to go back, I’m afraid she won’t obey. She left Nagasaki without telling even you, her “onii-chan”, it means that her determination is already unshakable. And as her onii-chan, it’s your duty to be considerate of her feelings, right?”

“You have such a cheeky mouth Kugi Kizutaka-kun, Perhaps the purpose of Risuka’s “Crossing the city gate and coming here” was indeed to find her father, but the reason she doesn’t want to go back is probably not that simple.”

“...I don’t think he’s particular about anything else. He said the reason he refuses to go to elementary school is because he doesn’t want to create any strange ties to the school.”

“For a person with good instincts, your senses are blunt.” The words from Mizukura Haki left me confused. He looked up at the sky, then looked down at me. “Let me ask you straightforwardly, Kugi Kizutaka, what have you done to Risuka?”

“...Nothing in particular.”

“What kind of flowery rhetorics did you use to win over Risuka’s heart?”

“Well...” I spread my hands as if feigning ignorance. “It’s not possible for me to observe how well my words are understood by Risuka, because there’s no way for me to observe how well she understands me.”

“I don’t know what you think of Risuka, but she’s the kind of person who doesn’t get to show any form of attachment. She has always been unsociable, even as a child, but she can’t be blamed. After all, her family environment different from those of normal people. To tell you the truth, I

had a feeling Risuka resented me in the past. Now, Risuka, who is difficult to get close to, can't let go of you."

"...Well, I don't know what to say about that."

Strictly speaking, it wasn't like I really didn't know to say , at least in the case of Kagetani Hebiyuki , when Risuka was afraid of "the Kingdom of Shadows", the heroic words I said may have been the reason. But I don't intend to tell Mizukura Haki. After all, it was Risuka's sad past and should not be mentioned casually. I don't know how Mizukura Haki interpreted my silence, but I saw him continue to speak as usual.

"It is true that Risuka is not easy to get close to others, but once she gets emotionally attached to another person, she can't do without him. She seems to be independent, but she is actually a sticky candy. Maybe it would be more appropriate to call it a recessive dependence syndrome! This is not her own personality."

"...what do you mean?"

"Just like a famous sword who chooses its owner, the principle is similar. Basically, the major premise of her being "made" was mainly to act as a loyal "tool" for Mizukura Shingo , which means that Mizukura Risuka's subordination is quite high. That's why, for that reason, you seem to be under a misunderstanding"

"Misunderstanding..."

"Because you have the daughter of Mizukura Shingo at your hands - you are in control of a magician. And you don't really look like you understand the gravity of the situation. Your feeble mind hasn't even managed to comprehend the true horrors of magicians "

The horrors...of magicians?

"Of course, Risuka is also partly to blame. Maybe her words and deeds are not something befitting that of "The Red Witch of Time" or "Magic Hunter", that's why you have this illusion." Mizukura Haki paused for a while, staring at me again, he said, "I learnt from Chamberlain about how you eliminated the Kagetani Hebiyuki. He shouldn't have been the kind of person you should have gotten close to. But you still did. So, why do you risking your life for this kind of danger? The answer is simple. Your curiosity precedes your inner fear . There is no other answer. You simply don't know what danger is, you simply don't know what terror is, it's just you simple don't know. You don't know what kind of joke you are playing on your own life. You are..."

“...you are simply unaware of the worst that could happen”

“... Is that all you had to say?”

“Yeah, that’s all I had to say.”

A disturbing silence fell. I gripped the arrow hidden in my palm as if to confirm its existence. The arrow engraved with magic words is the legacy of the Kagetani Hebiyuki , the “Kingdom of Shadows” . Even before Mizukura Haki called out to me a moment ago—I had been preparing for a long time, just in case. It's not a mere precaution. .Whether it’s the posture that Mizukura had just hugged Risuka in the coffee shop, or the look he showed when he introduced himself, it made me feel a bit of creepy hostility. I have two arrows ready. At this distance, no matter what Mizukura Haki attacks me with, I can adequately respond to it.

“Then I’ll get going home now”

“You won’t be going anywhere.”

Mizukura Haki made a sudden declaration.

“You should feel the horror of the magicians firsthand, so that you can learn what is meant by compromise, and be an obedient child.”

“... Please don’t put on airs. It really feel just depressing to watch you do that”

I said that with a tone of intentional provocation.

“If you are just pissed off at having your Risuka being stolen away from you , then just get on with it, Mizukura Haki!”

“You dare to challenge the magicians, your bravery knows no bounds. I thought you were a calm and rational person, but I didn't expect you to be an impulsive, irritable, hot-headed child! And allow me to correct you on one of you misunderstandings” Mizukura Haki was unexpectedly calm and composed.

“Whether it is the past or the present, Risuka will always be on my side, Even now-!”

Even now.. now-?

“...now, aim at him ,Risuka”

Alarmed, I turned around reflexively, but there was no one, no one at all. The space behind me was quiet, and there was no one.

“...Damn it!”

“Too late.”

Just as I turned back around, my sight was suddenly covered in blood red. I was shocked in my heart and quickly took a step back. What is this? Liquid-water? No, was it blood? I barely opened my eyes, only to find that my face, chest and abdomen were all blood red, and the right hand of Mizukura Haki's, his right hand after the bandage had been released and blood was flowing heavily out of it. It seems that Mizukura Haki spilled his blood on me, but... that's ridiculous? How could he make such a big wound on his right hand in an instant?

“Haha.” Perceiving my astonishment, Mizukura Haki said with a smile of satisfaction.

“My blood is the same as Risuka, and it is full of Magic Formulae. This is also the masterpiece of Shingo-san. The difference is that I can't contain all' Magic Formulae, so I can't form a Magic Sigil. As for this bandage “

While saying this, Mizukura Haki rewrapped the bandage. Then what happened was that, to my surprise - the blood that had been flowing as much as it was, stopped flowing altogether. It did not even seeped into the bandage anymore. At this point, I finally understood what was going on, because Mizukura Haki remembered that at the moment when the bandage was rolled up, a few magic words appeared on the bandage.

“That's also magical?”

“My blood is several levels lower than Risuka, and I can't stand the torture of too many wounds. However, since I finally gained this ability, and of course I should use it more, so my expediency The meter is the bandage on the wrist. These two bandages have the effect of temporarily stopping the time of the wound.” Mizukura Haki paused for a moment and continued to speak. “You know a lot, but unfortunately all of your knowledge is half baked. These two bandages are Magic Sigils, not magic.”

“...Isn't the Magic Sigil effective only once?”

“Is this also what Risuka said? Basically It's okay to be limited to one time, but there are always exceptions to everything... It seems that you trust Risuka very much, but it is a pity that Risuka is just a child. I believe she was

your wrong start. Understand? Risuka's knowledge is quite biased, and she may not know more than you, otherwise she would not be delusional to find out the whereabouts of Mizukura Shingo. That's what I mean when I say that she doesn't know fear. You don't know anything. You don't know anything about it, and that's why I have to take painstaking efforts. If you want to know something, you should've asked Chamberlain at least."

"Don't you dare insult Risuka any further."

"Insult? You are wrong, this is an expression of familiarity. Is this sense of familiarity making you frustrated? But then again, your expression from before was truly a sight to behold. It turns out that you never expected to be attacked by Risuka. This means that you think you have subdued Risuka and never thought that she would ever betray you."

"Yeah, that did surprise me a bit. Since there's no way a "pawn" would ever betray its master"

"Huh, that's distasteful." Mizukura Haki's smile disappeared.

"What do you think of Risuka? I don't believe that your anger comes from the insulted "pawn". Is this kind of response considered normal in the outside world?"

"I don't know what you're trying to get out of me, but I think you're wasting your time! Just what was the point of attacking me with your blood?"

"Well, my attack only stops here."

At this moment, just as I was about to approach the Mizukura Haki, a strong wind suddenly blew over, and an object passed at high speed between me and the Mizukura Haki. My vision could not catch sight of the object, I could only feel the strong wind blowing from the top down, and then in the next second, my ears received the sound of the object crashing. I first looked down at the objects on the ground, then looked up at the sky, and immediately realized what had happened.

"...!"

The sign above the vending machine broke free under the strong wind and fell directly to the ground. After realizing this fact, I only felt a cold sweat. If things were to happen even one second late, the sign would have hit me directly.

"This...this is...?"

I was shocked and I pulled my gaze back from the sky, only to find that Mizukura Haki was no longer in front of me. He ran far away, a long way from me. “Oops!”. I am very sorry for my carelessness. Just when I was stomping my feet with anger, Mizucang suddenly stopped and turned around to look at me.

“I’m sorry, even me as a spellcaster is not sure what will happen next! For safety’s sake, it is better to keep a distance from you! Besides ”

Mizukura broke into a smile.

“This is not a duel, but rather , this is a means by which I get to know you! It has nothing to do with victory or defeat, it is purely a “test” for you! If you want to surrender, just say so! If you are willing to help me persuade Risuka to return to Nagasaki, if you are willing to sit down and have a good conversation with me, just say so! I will naturally help you dispel the magic when you do that!”

After speaking, Mizukura Haki turned around and ran. For a while, I didn’t know what to do. All my attention was focused on the advertising sign at my feet. Is the result of the falling sign related to the magic he used? If his head is smashed into the head by this thing, he is indeed immortal and half-life; but he did not recite the curse at the time, and logically, there should be no time to act on the sign in advance. Is it related to the blood that drenched me? ‘Don’t know what will happen next’?

Impossible, too unreasonable. but—

“—Stop!”

I couldn’t let him leave like this, so I rushed before his figure was completely out of sight. As I took the first step, my body suddenly lost balance and fell heavily onto asphalt road. ...The laces had loosened. The thick and flat shoelaces were already very difficult to tie, and I ended up stepping on those myself. Damn it, such a stupid move at this critical juncture. I propped up my body with one hand and re-tied the loose shoelaces. My face was hot, I must have hit my nose when I fell, I guess I must have a nosebleed. I wiped off my nose blood, I stood up and continued to run forward, and at the same time, I made sure that the “arrow” was still in my hand. Mizukura Haki’s figure was already getting smaller by the second. At this rate, I might lose track of him. I have the confidence to catch up. But... if I remember correctly, there should be a subway station ahead. If he gets on that train, he’ll be able to get away completely.

“...I am going to lose him at this rate!”

Almost all of the “arrows” were left at home, and there were only five “arrows” in my hand, including the ones in my schoolbag and my hand. Since Mizukura Haki’s magic is not a “direct attack type,” as long as I deprive him of his mobility with the “arrow” of Kageyama Hebiyuki, it would amount to half-win. Really though, did that man do all this to ‘test’ me, Kugi Kizutaka? All for the sake of some “recognition”? He definitely won’t get away with this. I don’t give a damn if it’s Risuke’s brother or cousin, but – do you think there’s a single person, wizard or non-wizard, who has made a fool of me to this extent and survived? All right, I’ll beat him to a pulp for being in such a bad mood for all I care.

“--gaaah!”

Finally, I saw the figure of Mizukura Haki, and I fell heavily on the asphalt. It turned out that the shoelace of the other foot had loosened. Damn it, for a second time?! My knees were scratched, and dark red blood oozed out. I knew I should have worn long trousers. I looked up and searched for the whereabouts of Mizukura Haki, and found him standing in front of the zebra crossing, waiting for the signal to change from red to green. There are not even a few cars on the road, he is really law-abiding! The “Magic Kingdom” does not have cars, so when the people of Nagasaki come to the outside world, they will obey the traffic rules even more! In any case, this was a great opportunity, so I immediately stood up. The abrasion on the knee didn’t get in the way, but the nosebleed obstructed breathing, and it was a bit difficult to run. But this distance is nothing, and he ran to it in one breath. So I held my breath and ran towards the Mizukura Haki. He has turned into an unforgivable “enemy” in my eyes, a stumbling block that prevents me and Risuka from achieving our goals.

“You have lost your original calmness.” Mizukura Haki didn’t said without turning around. He looked at the sign in front of him, and said this sentence to himself. The sign is still red. “Was it that aggravating to think of the concept of ‘Risuka opposing you ? Or are you jealous of the sudden appearance of Risuka’s relatives, that is , so to speak, me?”

“... Even for a wild delusion, that’s absolutely ridiculous!”

Focussing on the arrow in my hand, just as I was about to catch up with him, the signal turned to green at a very inopportune moment. Normally, it would be better to say that it turned green just as I arrived – but in this case, it would have been better if it had stayed red. At the very last minute, just in time to reach it, Mizukura Haki ran out again. I believe that his physical strength would run out soon especially with a slender body like that. I will catch up with him sooner or later.

“..the heck?”

Just as I was about to run across the zebra crossing in one go, a honking sound from the right made me stop reflexively, stepping back hurriedly, I tried returning to the sidewalk. As a result, my footsteps became unstable and I fell again. For the third time today, and this time the back of the head landed first, I only felt black before my eyes.

“I ...ran the red light...?”

It's not - it's not unusual. There aren't many cars on this road to begin with. If the traffic light had just changed, it wouldn't be surprising if some drivers tried to drive past it at high speed. It was my fault for trying to cross the road without looking both ways. However, but... from a while ago, everything... the gears were not aligned... as if everything was going to go wrong... as if I was just having a bad day...

“You should understand what my “magic” is, right?” who had already crossed the pedestrian crossing, and who had already passed the crosswalk, and who was ahead of the jaywalking car, calling out to me over the pedestrian crossing, as I slumped down unceremoniously. At this point, the signal had already turned to red, and it was another “misfortune”.

“My name is Mizukura Haki, I go by the title of “The Persecuting Demon of Fraternity”! The attribute is “water” just like Risuka! As for my category--“

Mizukura Haki's attribute

“It's Fate !”

Fate---does he mean Destiny Interference?! That's the most orthodox interference fate system! In that sense, it's more terrifying than Risuka's time manipulation ability! Moreover, Mizukura Haki already turned eighteen this year, his age itself indicates that he is already a very mature magician! Speaking of this, I seem to recall that Risuka once mentioned it to me in my impression! The most terrifying part of the magician named “The Persecuting Demon of Fraternity” was his ability to destroy the established future-

“Mi - Mizukura Haki!”

I tried to raise my body, but for some reason, my body didn't twitch, not even the slightest bit. Even when I put my arms into the air, my body would not move from its half-supported position. It's not that it can't be moved, it's that it's more like - it's 'fixed'! Fixed? And then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw something I didn't want to believe. In my shadow,

there was an arrow in it. That's right – just like sewing up a shadow. Come to think of it, I am now clasping my hands on the ground – when I fell down earlier, I let go of the arrow! And now, one of those arrows I let go of has unfortunately sewn up my shadow, which is absurd! There's no way that's a coincidence – that's not possible!

“Wha... ah!”

However, the impossible coincidence merger has not ended and is still happening. My ears caught the high-decibel horn again, this time with the sound of tires rubbing violently on the asphalt. The “fixed” field of vision has not yet received the scene that is happening, unable to judge the upcoming event, I only saw Mizukura Haki on the other side of the road, admiring the result of his magic with an expression of surprise. This is the only clue, the only clue that allows me to judge the upcoming event. After a few seconds, the unexpected image of Mizukura Haki finally appeared in a corner of the field of vision.

“... You gotta be kidding me.”

A large truck was crashing towards the place where I fell and where I was “fixed” at breakneck speed. This bulky and heavy vehicle was obviously out of control, and the middle-aged driver wearing a hat panicked, and all his movements came into view in slow playback. The steering wheel seemed to have malfunctioned! I wanted to escape the scene very much, but my body had already been “fixed” and could not move at all!

“u,guguguguguguguguguguguguguguguguguguguguguguu--!”

I heard a destructive sound as if it were the end of the world.

★★★

“Destiny interference?”

“That’s right, yes.” Risuka nodded. “The one that falls into this category is my magic. Besides-well, foreseeing the future and seeing the past are also a kind of interference with the destiny system. Simply put, it is to actively change the “Finalised Script” .“

““The finalized script”-there is such a thing?”

“In principle, “there is”. But since there is someone like me, the story is rather variable Destiny is like a current flowing from the positive pole to

the negative pole. It should be easier to understand this way.... However, magicians that interfere with the fate system are very rare, and I have not seen many of them. The most important thing is that this kind of magic is not as easy to use as expected, so not many people are willing to learn.”

“I don't know... being able to interfere with fate seems like a pretty good kind of magic. Other than Risuka's 'time', what other types of magic are out there? What are the other magical abilities that can interfere with fate?”

“Hmm...” Risuka thought for a moment. “The most well-known kind of magic is similar to mine. In short, it is the magic that brings misfortune to the caster.”

“Misfortune...?”

“It is.” Risuka nodded, with a careless expression as usual. “That’s the ability to ‘tear down the pre-existing script’. I was called “the Red Witch of Time”, and the magician who uses that is known by the title of “The Persecuting Demon of Fraternity” among the people.”

“That title’s a bit too long and makes zero literary sense.”

“The title was not chosen by himself, so it’s not his fault. In fact, that person is my relative, and also a terrifying magician.”

“Bringing bad luck... It feels closer to a “curse”, and ” being a “Witch” or “Magician” has nothing to do with it. What does that kind of magic look like? It’s not just about making the other party unlucky, right?”

“Yes, it’s as you say. What’s going to happen next, not even the caster can predict that. This kind of magic is a completely autonomous and involuntary kind of magic, and has nothing to do with the casters' will or thoughts. In short, it will make the caster fall into misfortune that is completely irrelevant to their own desires and attempts.”

“Seems quite abstract, like it's difficult to generalize a concrete image.”

“It's because of its abstraction, that it’s so terrible. The more ambiguous the explanation, the wider are the range of applications. Didn't you say that magic with a wide range of applications poses a threat before? The ultimate simplicity is the ultimate complexity, and the same applies to abstract magic. It is absolutely infinite and almost invincible “Risuka paused. “Worst of all, it results in death.”

“Death?”

“I mean, the misfortune continues till you die.”

“I don't....like it . Well, I don't think it's anything to be concerned about, since I'll probably never meet a guy like that. Although the existence of such a person makes me feel a bit anxious , so, just in case let's just assume that if I ever happened to encounter such a person one day by some stroke of misfortune, Risuka, would there be any way to deal with him?”

“Hmm... Actually, I have never seen this kind of magic in action for myself. I just heard of it from others.” Risuka lowered her head to think, and kept playing with the cutter blade with her right hand. “If the caster cancels the cast or loses the magic power, the curse should naturally lose its effect.”

“That is to say , it would be fine to restrict the caster's actions.”

Well, in a nutshell, yes, but I think Kizutaka should have a general idea of how difficult it is to do that in the midst of all the 'misfortune' that's going on.

“That's true, I suppose” I nodded. “Misfortune” has so many levels. But since it's a kind of magic', so shouldn't there be any countermeasure, a convenient way to deal with it?”

“Perhaps, but...”

Risuka paused for a while.

“Even if there is a way of restraint, I absolutely don't want to become an enemy of that person.”

“...Seriously!”

I crawled out from underneath the truck, screaming as if to blow out the running lights that were still persistently going round and round in my head. Looking around, as expected, there was quite a commotion and people were beginning to gather. I looked towards the roadway. Whether the light was red or green, cars were stopped in both directions, vertically and horizontally. The traffic had paralysed. Confirming this, I looked back at the truck behind me, it was a huge body weighing about ten tons. I gazed in horror. If I was hit head-on by this behemoth, I, a frail elementary school student, would probably have ended up with no trace of my body! However, it was possible to get into the space under the chassis just when the truck was about to hit it, and I barely managed to survive. If the chassis under the truck wasn't that high, or if the diameter of the tires had been just a few centimeters shorter, my upper body may have been shaved into two parts long ago. And apparently, the impact of the body going straight into the back

wall blew the arrow somewhere else, and it got out of my shadow. and my body was able to move once again.

“I guess I finally understand his “magic” now.”

First of all, there is no chain relationship between the series of misfortunes that happened to me before, otherwise the impact of the “truck accident” would not have hit the “arrow” accidentally. It's just that each event is completely independent and separate. Truly, by accident, by chance, by a prank of fate – this is what is happening. And – and – apparently – now I'm somehow convinced that the "misfortune" that occurs is not relative misfortune, but absolute misfortune. Where my will is located – indeed, I saw that it doesn't have much to do with it. So, is there a breakthrough in that area:? Anyway, this, this magic – this is a matter of – probability, this is a matter of probability. But oh dear – a railroad and a kidnapping, followed by a probabilistic crime. This has low-key turned into some stupid excuse for a third-rate mystery novel. Just what the heck is so good about them anyways?

“ ... ”

I bit my lower lip, avoiding the scattered glass shards, picked up the hat beside me and put it on. I shouldn't have attracted much attention from others when I climbed out of the car, but more and more people have started gathering around, so they will find out sooner or later. This is no joke. The hat on my head belongs to the truck driver. As for where the truck driver is, well... that is of no concern to me. Hmm, the hat... it reminds me of Risuka. Dammit, this feeling is quite uncomfortable. The memory of my quarrel with Risuka still lingered in a corner of my heart, leaving a bad aftertaste. The feelings of Risuka Mizukura..., of course I have thought about her. But then again, was my consideration actually real or was it just a facade?...Well, I admit it may be the latter. But then again, what does “reality” even mean? Do you really think the world is what it seems to be? After all, isn't what I am trying to create in this world already unreal?

“Ah..!”

Somehow or the other, my sight wandered around the area, and by chance I finally found him! I expected him to have already left the scene in the chaos, but there he was, right at the other end of the road, beside the stairs leading to the subway station. There stood Mizukura Haki. Our eyes met, and when they did, Mizukura Haki turned around and walked down the stairs with a smile. I can no longer act pretentious. This is no joke, I don't want to be tortured to death by these inexplicable “misfortunes”, saying that nothing can make Mizukura leave like this. So I lowered my body and quickly crossed the road. All the vehicles on the road had stopped. It is reasonable to say that

similar “misfortune” should not occur, but I still remain alert to the vehicles beside me. Is “suspecting ghosts” also one of the side-effects of magic? After crossing the road, I headed into the entrance of the subway, and with a glance I saw the Mizukura Haki looking around at the turn of the stairs. After discovering me, Mizukura Haki showed a surprised look. I guess he didn't expect me to act so quickly after leaving such a big accident behind. But, unfortunately, I'm confident that I'm second to none when it comes to the speed of my reactions. But, okay, that's convenient. In that case, let me surprise him even more. I jumped down at him at once. With the momentum I jumped in, I threw my body towards Mizukura, who had been frozen at the landing. Originally, it is not an unavoidable kind of attack method, however, in terms of the unexpectedness of jumping directly from the stairs, it is still unknown whether Mizukura can really escape this trick.

“Haha.” But Mizukura Haki still showed a confident smile.

“Basically, the closer you get to me, the more effective the magic is.”

At the same time I heard this, my body hit an object. However, this object was not Mizukura Haki, but rather an office worker who hurriedly climbed the stairs, he was a sturdy man and thus, and the recoil force on my body was beyond imagination. In addition, the opponent's physique was very strong, my body bounced back and my back directly hit the corner of the stairs.

“Nghh..gah”

As a result of the fact that the man with whom I crashed has fallen on his face with the contents of his bag blown all over the place, Mizukura Haki returned to his heels with a smile and descended the stairs towards the station, as if he didn't care that I was moaning and groaning, just as if the man with whom I crashed had fallen on his face. Bad. If I let him get on the tram, that would be the end of me. No wait, calm down. Before going through the ticket gate, he should buy a ticket first. That small delay would be enough for me to catch up with him. Barely supporting my painful body, I fortunately confirmed that there were no fractures. The office worker who had fallen tried to look up in pain, and I immediately stepped out of his vision. I can't let him see my face. There was a muffled noise from the soles, which didn't feel bad. Then I turned around and rushed down the stairs, only to find that the Mizukura Haki was about to pass the ticket gate.

“This... how is this even possible?”

The sight before me left me bewildered. Did he expect this situation a long time ago, and so he bought the ticket in advance? Impossible, judging from the complexity of the process, he couldn't think so far, not to mention

that Mizukura Haki had just set foot on the land in Kono City, Saga Prefecture today, and he should not be so familiar with the geography here. Is it taking advantage of the gap in the truck accident—this is also unlikely, the time gap was too short. After the “fix” was lifted, I immediately climbed out from under the chassis of the truck. This period of time was at most only enough for him to leave. It was impossible for him to return to the scene after buying the ticket. That being the case, what is he ah, yes. What just came out of the turnout of the ticket machine was slightly larger than the ticket – maybe it was a commuter pass. If my guess is correct, he must have stolen that monthly pass from the office worker's briefcase while I crashed into him at the turnaround of the stairs. This does not require the use of magic, and the time is more than enough. nMan, it's unreasonable to steal other people's belongings. But then again, how could things have turned out like this? Bad luck came to me all the time, but my hostile Mizukura Haki received a lot of good-luck. On the whole, the luck that Mizukura Haki received must be equal to my misfortune, so the closer I get to him, the stronger is the effectiveness of magic. It turns out that this is indeed the truth. When I got too close to him, I got involved in accidents like the fallen sign or truck. There is no other way than to waste my precious time buying tickets. There is no risk of crossing the ticket gate. Although, the time of the subway is fixed, so I still have time to catch up with that guy. I deliberately avoided the ticket gate and headed straight towards the ticket vending machine. On the way, I took out my wallet from my school bag and took out the change to put into the coin gate. Shouldn't it be enough to buy a platform ticket? Unexpectedly, my one-hundred-yen coin could not be inserted into the coin slot. I carefully looked at the message displayed on the screen. It turned out that this ticket machine “stopped selling tickets.” Cursing the situation inside my heart, I turned to the ticket vending machine next platform, and the hundred-yen coin fell out of the refund port. I tried it several times and the result was the same. It seems that this one-hundred-yen coin is probably damaged, so the machine will not accept it! I opened my wallet and found that there were only ten yen coins left in it. Even if the amount was enough to buy a platform ticket, it would be very time-consuming to invest so many copper plates one by one. Had it not been for buying two cans of coffee in front of the vending machine, and using two hundred-yen coins... Oh god, my luck was too bad! I even have to suffer these kind of trivial misfortunes now? Fighting back the urge to scream, I carefully put the ten-yen coins into the ticket machine, one by one. Finally, after putting in 13 coins, the light at the ticket office lit up. I didn't think the ticket machine was going to break down, but it didn't. The ticket came out as it should. I was relieved by this obvious fact. I snatched the ticket out and headed for the ticket gate. I pass through the ticket gate and run down the escalator to the underground level. After entering the station, the crowd suddenly increased a lot. Everyone started to notice my frayed knees and the blood stains splashed on my body by Mizukura Haki, but I didn't have so much time to care about their strange eyes. Fortunately, this subway station

has a single platform structure, so there is no need to consider whether to go south or north.

“...Ah!”

I almost forgot, the word “fortune” doesn’t apply to me anymore. The northbound train just entered the platform at this moment, and the result

“Hey, hey! Hey, hey, hey, hey!”

A large number of high school students stepped off the train that had just entered the station.

“No way!”

Everyone was wearing school uniforms. Although the style is not the same as the uniform on Mizukura Haki’s body, it is difficult to distinguish it from a distance. At this time in the elementary school I was attending, today's fifth-grade students only have to take five classes; but now it's when high school students are just out of school, there are not only one or twenty students. This is a rare school wave in the countryside. The station is crowded with people, and male students make up the majority, with only a few female students. If even this situation is the result of magic, how should I respond? This kind of magic itself does not have any “will”, it is purely a distortion of “destiny.” Whether it comes from the hand of a magician or not, facing this kind of product lacking “human desires”, there is no basis for responding at all. The “magic” of Kageyama Hebiyuki was basically a nemesis for Mizukura Risuka, and the “magic” of Mizukura Haki’s is basically a nemesis for Kugi Kizutaka! This is the horror of magic, this is the so-called magic of Mizukura Haki? He didn’t need to do anything to me, as long as I was covered with blood, it could cause such terrible results, which originated from abstract terrible. At this time, the broadcast of “The train is about to leave the station” sounded. Not good, really bad. If Mizukura Haki manages to catch this bus, I really can’t catch him. At that time, as Risuka said I have to keep on facing misfortunes until the moment I die. This kind of result is more terrifying than meeting the god of death, and when I get on the train and leave the Mizukura Haki on the platform, the result is the same. But that doesn't mean that when I get on this train, if I'm wrong about something, it's the same. In that case, I'd be objectively dumb. And - now I'm best suited to playing the dumbass. We should not underestimate the importance of the choice we made, and we should think that the first choice was wrong. But even if you choose the opposite, there's a good chance you won't make it. The probability of this is supposed to be one in two - and now it's almost nine out of ten.

“It’s decided...!”

There are no criteria for judgment. The only thing I'd have to say is that the train was red. I tried to jump into the train. When I was building up an after-the-fact theory in my head that this was a natural way to escape from the situation, I thought.

“Oi, Kizutaka-kun|!”

I heard someone calling my name from a distance. Taking a closer look and I found a slender tall boy waving at me from a distance. That's right, who else could he be but Mizukura Haki? We were separated by a large group of high school students. It's not good, but it's going to be lost again. But at this time, if you separate the crowd and catch up, it would gather too much attention. Can't forget that my fashion currently seems bloody. However, I couldn't stop there, so I had to lock in the approximate direction and continue to track his whereabouts.

“—Mizukura Haki!”

I yelled with all my strength, as if to boost my morale. Fortunately, the target was found just before the door of the tram. If he really gets on this tram, I'm afraid we would really be separated. Fortunately, he called me out.....wait, “Fortunately”? Why did Mizukura Haki call me? As long as he quietly watched me get on the tram, wouldn't he get an absolute victory, wouldn't he easily meet the conditions of an easy win? Is he showing mercy...? No wait, he is similar to Risuka...is he using a Magic Formula?

“—Ah, so that's it!”

Just stepping out, I immediately used my previous ability to dodge the truck from before and quickly stepped back. I slipped into the train just as the door was about to be closed. As a result, my knees ended scraping the door on both the sides and, and my right ankle, which was a little late, was caught in the door. A piercing pain hit my heart. No, I must not scream. If I do so I would be found by the station attendant and once that happens, I would be noticed and everything would be over. Hence I resisted the pain, gritted my teeth and pulled hard, I pulled at my ankle as hard as I could. It is not good to be found by the station attendant, but it is also bad to be caught with one foot outside the door. When the train starts, my right foot would definitely be broken by the fence at the end of the platform. Damn, the door closed so tightly that the right foot could not be pulled out at all. The thought of asking for help emerged in my mind, but this was tantamount to surrendering to Mizukura Haki, and I was still unwilling to think about it. So-

“Uuuuuuuu...aah!”

After a hard tug, I finally managed to pull my right foot in just before the train started. But... alas, it really is a good fortune and I must realise that I am currently cursed by misfortune. Although I managed to keep my right foot, I also lost my new shoes in exchange. But then again, fortunately, the ankle-covered high boots are worn on the feet, which have a certain protective effect. Would Mizukura Haki pick them up for me? I sighed, propped up and stood up. The clamped ankle was not injured slightly, and it seemed to have hurt the bone. The scattered passengers in the compartment (most of the passengers got off at the last stop) coincidentally looked at me with suspicious eyes, but when they came into contact with my provocative eyes, they all turned away immediately. It seems that they don't want to get into troubled matters. For these incompetent people, it is indeed quite wise. After looking around, I picked an empty seat and sat down.

“...Huh...”

In a blink of an eye, the train passed two stops, and no misfortune happened to me. Sure enough, as I expected, since the blood of Mizukura is a kind of “magic” as he himself said, the caster himself must be by my side in order to effectively exert the magical effect. I learned the basic knowledge of this kind of magic from Risuka. Coincidentally, Mizukura Haki once said something similar- “The closer you are to me, the more powerful the magic is.”

In other words, the farther we are, the less effective “magic” is. This explanation is logical. When crossing the road earlier, I was almost hit by a truck when I caught him. This traffic accident should be my biggest misfortune; but when he walked into the station, I was standing in front of the ticket vending machine. Only met with trivial misfortune, the difference between the two is simply not the same. Perhaps from the eyes of others, I am just a coward wishing to be as far away from him as possible. To be honest, I really don't like this feeling; but thinking about it carefully, Mizukura's Haki was always within my sight, no matter what he waited to cross the road, walk down the stairs, and even when I lost his track and was about to enter the tram, he still called me, which proved that he had to try to lure me to catch up. Too close may be implicated, too far away is not possible, this is his cover.

“But the words come back again, no matter how far away, the curse isn't actually cancelled.” Looking at the blood on my clothes, I sighed. If this magic type were really the as Risuka, the blood on my body would have evaporate instantly as the effectiveness disappeared. Because it is -a Magic Formula.

“Hmm...and I don't really like the fact that I am getting killed.”

As long as you escape the scene, you may be able to reach a stalemate, but this is not the result I desired. In any case, I will try to fight back, but the “counter-attack” here is very different from the “counter-attack” in everyone’s impression. Risuka once applied mathematical theory to metaphor magic. The so-called “winning or losing” does not apply to the four operations of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. Once attacked by the enemy, the damage will always exist. Even if the opponent is retaliated by the same means, the fact that the damage has been caused cannot be erased. Basically, the logic of “a tooth for a tooth and an eye for an eye” cannot be used for winning or losing. With this in mind, I think the top priority now is to discard all ideas. why? The reason lies in my “blood”...yes, it is not the blood in the Mizukura Haki, but the blood flowing in my body. The reason why Mizukura was able to lock in my position before was mainly due to the “smell of Risuka”. Although he did not say how much the effective range is, it should be limited to a certain extent according to common sense. In a small area. If I remember correctly, it’s like “Knowing that I’m nearby, but I can’t find the exact location.” What is certain is that this requires a considerable degree of concentration, and this ability alone is not good enough, I just hope that both sides can stand on a fair footing. After all, I am an ordinary person. I neither know how to use “invisibility” nor have the ability to feel the “smell” of the Mizukura Haki. Therefore, this concentration is definitely based on the premise of magical ability. “Blood relationship” is only a secondary condition. That’s it. In short, he knows where I am, but I don’t know where he is. This advantage is really unfair in this game of tag. On the bright side, at least it’s better than the situation of hide-and-seek.

“Well then..”

In this situation, I can only try to return to the original point... The magician, the existence with abilities above me “the character who has the abilities I lack.” How should I deal with this kind of enemy? As long as you recall the previous teaching and fighting rules, you will definitely calm yourself down, and the effect will be the same as counting sheep. Hmm... First figure out the situation, I don’t need tactics to deal with the weak. In the face of a powerful enemy, an effective combat plan must first be drawn up. Yes, the most important thing now is to acknowledge the victory of the opponent’s relative majority. It doesn’t matter if the opponent wins by eight points or even nine points, I just need to defend the chance of the last point. So the point is not “how to win” but “where to win”. What I care about is not the victory of the process. If you want to win, you must win at the last moment. This is the ultimate victory. Since the opponent has abilities that I do not have, Since your opponent has abilities that you don't have, it is a given that you should be beaten by your opponent and that it is normal for your opponent to beat you. Do not confuse "where the opponent can win" and "where we should win". . It’s better to just abandon the opponent’s place, which definitely does not amount to failure. The opponent’s victory and

one's own defeat cannot be equated. The goal of victory should be "self's victory" rather than "enemy's defeat." This is often the most confusing concept for laymen. Defeating the opponent is very different from securing your own victory, sometimes the opponent must first win a few games. The enemy in front of you is just a temporary obstacle. It is definitely not a rival. Once you regard the opponent as a competitor, the focus will be distorted. Never put yourself and the enemy in the same position, even if the enemy's ability is stronger than yourself, you must firmly believe that you are absolutely above the enemy.

"..Alright then."

Neither particularly passionate, nor particularly cold, My heart, which had been beating erratically in the face of Risuka's 'big brother', the magician of the fate interference system, has returned to a state of calmness Now then, where to begin with? The blood of my body is not the issue, what matters currently is about how to deal with the blood of Mizukura Haki. As long as the magic isn't cancelled, the shadow of death would be always looming over me, so I have to think about countermeasures as soon as possible. Anyway, since it's already so far away, I can just think of a solution at the next stop. The passengers in the current carriage have either gotten off early or moved to other carriages. They don't recognize my face because I still wear a hat anyway, and even if it causes a commotion, it's not painful to me. But then again, even if I discount the magic of Mizukura Haki, I am really unlucky today. Firstly I got involved in a quarrel with Risuka, next was the appearance of her over-protective cousin. This has been all disastrous so far.

" ... "

Does Mizukura Haki really want to take Risuka back to Nagasaki? According to him, Risuka didn't seem to agree, but to Mizukura Haki, it was just a child's absurdity. I have to admit that he was right. This matter is from the beginning to the end. Risuka is just a ten-year-old girl. Whether she knows magic or not, she cannot change this indisputable fact. Although she has the last resort and invincible "trump card", there are still restrictions on the conditions of use. The "invincible" Risuka, who can only last for one minute, and the Mizukura Shingo who has been in an "invincible" state since she was born, the outcome is obvious. It's a good idea to think that no matter how many grimoires you collect and strive for, there's no way you're going to be able to reach the level of the Nyarlathotep.

"but if I'm here..."

I whispered. That's right, as long as I'm here, there will naturally be a way to make the impossible possible, and it can also help Risuka achieve her goal. This is my confession, and I am convinced of it. Mizukura Haki seems to

think that I don't know anything about magic, which is not the case. The experience I have accumulated with Risuka over the past year may not be comparable to that of Mizukura Haki who lived in Nagasaki for 18 years, and now I under the "misfortune" magic of the "Persecuting Demon of Fraternity" I have yet again experienced how fearsome magic can truly get, I personally experienced it after all; but -

"But -"

I'm not a kid who doesn't know the height of the sky.

"...Boring!"

The scenery outside the window was twilight, and the train was about to leave the ground. Nesting in the train is not a solution, anyway, a countermeasure has been drawn up, so just get off at the next stop. At this moment, the speed of the train suddenly slowed down. At first, I thought it had arrived, but I didn't hear the announcement in the car. The speed of the train is getting slower and slower, and the broadcast in the car does not sound until it is completely stationary, and it is not the broadcast to arrive at the station.

"There was an accident ahead, and the train was suspended. Once again, we repeat. there was an accident ahead "

".....!"

Accident ! No way? Wait a minute, I shouldn't be surprised, this kind of coincidence can never be an accident! The damned "Misfortune" is back again! But... just why the heck? Could it be that Mizukura Haki is also in this tram? Did he also get on this train from the previous station? But this time the "Misfortune" came way too suddenly, and there was only one passenger in the carriage -

"...I

see, that's why ..." I looked at the scenery outside the window indifferently and found that the train was parked on an iron bridge. There happened to be a river in front, so the subway must be pulled out of the ground temporarily. Standing on the bank of the river under the iron bridge was a man in a student uniform with an unnatural posture. At this distance, and separated by a layer of glass, I honestly can't be sure if the man in uniform is a misunderstanding. But as far as the current situation is concerned, apart from his reappearance, it is really difficult to find a second explanation.

“He took a shortcut...?”

What I found unbelievable was not the fact that Mizukura Haki ran here one step earlier to intercept the tram. As long as you hop on a taxi at the subway station, it is indeed possible to arrive here before the tram, and it is also the best place to intercept the moment the train drills out of the ground. The impeccable forward attack is also the safest tactic. As for whether I got on the train or not, Mizukura Haki could have judged that by “scent”, which is not difficult for him. Basically, his magic has a weakness (strictly speaking, it cannot be called a weakness), that is, “You can’t get too close, and you can’t get too far away.” If you get too close, you may involve yourself in it. You have to worry that the effect will be greatly reduced, so the only way for the caster is to hide in a confined space like a train car. However, hiding in a confined space is tantamount to imprisonment in disguise. Although this can effectively reduce the severity of misfortune, the opponent can stand at a distance and attack the imprisoned target successively. Mizukura Haki was aiming for this situation from the beginning, that’s believable . But what I find so unbelievable here is my own bad luck at this point in time. Bad luck – yes, you read that right – this is just the kind of bad luck I’m talking about. If – if Mizukura Haki had the nerve to directly hit me with his "misfortune" in this enclosed space inside the train car, because he got in at the previous station or the next station ahead of me, my next move would have been blocked. That was the only place where I could make my next move. After making up my mind, I got up from the seat.

“Hmm...”

I almost fell and I managed to stabilize myself. Taking a closer look, it turned out to be the shoelace – the shoelace on the left shoe had loosened and I stepped over on it with my right foot. Since I didn’t wear shoes on my right foot, and I felt more sensitive, so I knew that I had stepped on the laces of my left foot. Now even if the person by the river is not the Mizukura Haki, I am pretty sure that guy must be hiding nearby. It was not easy to balance the two feet high and low, so I simply took off the shoe on my left foot. I remember that the door of the train is equipped with a manual switch, but the Mizukura Haki is nearby. It is undoubtedly a suicidal act to start the switch rashly. It is more appropriate to choose a more aggressive means. So I put the shoes that I took off on my left hand.

“One, two , three!”

Using shoes as gloves, I knocked hard towards the window in the opposite direction. The glass window smashed to the ground with a crashing sound, and I was also shaken a few steps back by the huge reaction force, and the slippery socks almost made me slip on the ground again. But the goal was finally achieved, and then I used the shoe on my left hand to wipe off the

remaining glass by the window. There seemed to be a few passengers in the next car, I had to speed up. After I had roughly cleared, I went straight out of the window. I'm grateful for my small size, just like I was in the truck before - although this doesn't happen often.

“uooaah...!”

The window of the train was still a long way away from the iron bridge. Even though I had prepared a defensive measure in advance, I still hurt my waist when I jumped down. Although I got used to it, I didn't feel much. It's easy to forget when you're in casual contact with them, but trains are really pretty big vehicles. Of course, I already had this kind of knowledge in Takamine Kotaro's case the other day. I just jumped off the iron bridge directly from the train, got down and moved around so that the people on the train wouldn't see me. It's a good idea to be cautious and careful No, I don't think it's all that significant to be cautious here, considering what we're about to do. I prefer to be in the middle of the railroad bridge as much as possible - the river seems to be deeper in the middle. It's enough of a river for a subway to avoid, I'm sure it doesn't matter what position it's in, but I don't think it matters how deep it is:

“ ... ”

So, the next step I'm was going to take is, in essence was, to wash away this blood that is getting my whole body wet. I'm not going to be able to get it right. I'm going to be able to say that this blood was magical in itself - just get rid of it, physically. I'm sure you'll be able to find it in the next station's toilet, but the fact that we're on the river was my final bad luck in I'm not sure if that's the best way to describe it, but it's more of a misfortune than, because even after being driven to this point, at the very last minute, really, really, really, really hard, this is the only option left as a remedy, as if it were a harassment. Hmmm. But as I said, Mizukura Haki is also a wizard - a wizard who cannot cross the ocean and is congenitally trapped in Kyushu. He may think he's isolating me in a place like this where there's no way to escape, but he has a blind spot in his thinking. The river leads to the sea. I'm not going to be able to get a good idea of what I'm going to do with it, but I'm going to be able to get a good idea of what I'm going to do with it. And that action is not hampered by Mizukura's "misfortune" - a "fall" from the "railway bridge" and a "fall" into the "river" is nothing more than "misfortune" no matter where or what one thinks, because! It's like curing poison with poison - if you say so, this was Mizukura Haki's mistake. This was the ultimate loophole in his magical ability. And I, Kugi Kizutaka, absolutely can't afford to not take advantage of that opportunity.

“...That said, but...”

The iron bridge is really high, far above what was my original imagination, and the distance from the train window to the iron bridge is not comparable.

Do I really want to jump down from the bridge...Although this height is not as high as the a high platform diving for swimming competitions, but it's very hard to believe that I will be safe. The river seems to be flowing pretty slowly

“...!”

And that's when the train - it started moving. The accident must have been dealt with because I got off the train - because I got off the train. If I hadn't been on the train, it wouldn't have been like this - fate. The railroad bridge was swinging wildly. It's a relief that the train was not moving fast enough (otherwise I would have been shaken off the bridge without question) - but when there is no more train body to block the gap, I see Mizukura Haki's eyes meet mine on the riverbed. Well, in this case, it's not just because Mizukura Haki found me....., but if you run into some kind of interference here, you are really out of options. It's an unavoidable attack for me. In that sense, this place is like an execution site. If the next train derails - no, you don't have to wait for that to happen, the "aging" railroad bridge will collapse and you'll end up submerged in water along with a bunch of steel beams:!

“It’s really annoying magic...”

Mizukura Haki - I don't like this guy. I don't know what it is, but... but from the first moment I saw that guy, I didn't like him, I didn't like him, I couldn't help it. I don't care if he was the cousin or the father, but I didn't like that guy who did the same thing as hugging Risuka from the very beginning. The fate interference system - it's certainly a great magic, but I don't want that guy as a pawn. All right, then... So let's settle the score, your bad luck or my bad luck, shall we?

“Come on!”

With suicidal ease, I jumped off the railroad bridge into the gloomy depths of the river. I didn't pray to God, of course.

★★★

“Everyone says that children don’t have the right to choose their parents. In fact, parents can’t choose children either.”

The expressionless Mizukura Haki said with an indifferent tone.

“My father was just a small character, a loser in life, simply a hopeless guy with low self-esteem that’s the sort of good for nothing he was. Almost as if he were the very embodiment of inferiority complex.” Mizukura Haki said with a self-deprecating smile. “As his son, of course I am no better. Genes don’t lie, and I am a helplessly incompetent loser, just like my father. My father however wanted me to be a genius, but I couldn’t even use the simplest magic”

In the “Magic Kingdom”- Madou City, Nagasaki Prefecture’s finest capital, it is not hard to imagine how a magician who can’t use magic would be treated. Since ancient times, the people of the “Magic Kingdom” have discriminated against their compatriots living on the other side of the “City Gate”. Even if they are fellow countrymen, those without magic power and those with weak magic power - they can be cruel to any extent.

“After all, my father got himself involved in a forbidden curse- and his own brother killed him. It may sound like an exegesis when I say this as his son, but that's not to say that he was a bad person, but my father was really not a heinous villain, let alone the inferior magician that everyone thought. The forbidden curse was not for himself , but for me to be more precise, to be more accurate, it was for myself, having a son who was a failure like me, but even I think it was for me. If I had been a better wizard when I was a kid, I think he might not be dead. He beat me up pretty badly, but I still get my hopes up. I dream because it's a dream that can't be fulfilled anymore. If I became a better wizard, my father would praise me for it. My father never once praised me after all.

Mizukura pretended to shrug his shoulders with disinterest.

“Risuka's existence was the direct cause of my father’s murder. Of course she didn't know about it. Risuka got the outstanding genes of her father, Mizukura Shingo, and was a magical genius since she was a child-more precise It should be said that her father should have made a good genius. But whether it was born or made by the day after tomorrow, it is the same to the father. I didn’t even know how to chant mantras and even the most basic magical calculations were beyond me , Mizukura Risuka’s excellent performance really stabbed into my father’s self-esteem. I can probably understand the feelings of my father, and therefore, I also feel puzzled.”

Mizukura Haki was silent for a long while.

“Why does there have to be such a big difference just because our parents were different?”

He said, as if to spit out all his hatred.

“Since you have encountered Kagetani Hebiyuki, a kidnapper who specialized in abducting girls, you should know that the way the “Magic Kingdom” deal with criminals is very cruel. As freedom is largely guaranteed, the price of freedom is also high. For a kid like you who lives in such a peaceful place, it's unimaginable. You can't imagine what you can't know, and what shouldn't be – it's impossible for a human being to imagine. That's how badly a criminal can be treated. And – it's the same for the sons of criminals as well. Messing with a forbidden curse is a first-degree crime, even if it's not attempted, it's a more serious crime than killing first degree murder.. If it weren't for Shingo-san's help, I would have died in the wilderness.”

There wasn't the slightest hint of thankfulness in his tone when he talked about Mizukura Shingo.

“Since then, I became Risuka's “big brother” sorry, I mentioned it before. Risuka is a surly child with a volatile temper. It is not easy to get close to her. It is difficult to grasp her heart. Thoughts. This kind of person can actually become a genius. At that time, I was full of jealousy and hatred. Mizukura Risuka was the unfortunate initiator. She ruined my life and everything about me. My heart burned. There was a flame of anger and hatred. Several times I wanted to kill her personally, and once even strangled her neck while sleeping.” Mizukura Haki sighed.

“...But she was also the one who melted my hatred away. Risuka seems to depend on me, but in fact I depend on her. Whether it is in the past, present or future, she is by my side. Actually, I guess I am indeed a bit thankful, not to Shingo-san, but towards Risuka. I thank her from the bottom of my heart. The bandage on my hand—” Mizukura pointed at the bandage on his wrist. “Sealed by this bandage, the 'Magic Formula' woven into my blood. Shingo-san constructed it for me and on a whim – ironic, isn't it? My life has been synonymous with misfortune, and the last series of misfortunes gave me the ability of ‘magic’ . The orthodox “magic” of the destiny system. This life is destined to live in the shadow of “unfortunate” and suffer the ridicule of others, even though I am now a magician with a title, the fact that I had a hopeless father, and the inextricable “misfortune”, will still follow me for the rest of my life. However, Risuka is different. Although Risuka's father is not a criminal, he is not an ordinary person, and the treatment Risuka received is of course not ordinary. Go. As long as I think about this, I can't help feeling ashamed. My thoughts are too immature, and my life is too smooth. Risuka's hard work and Risuka's persistence make me feel ashamed. The person who was at the mercy of my father was not me, it should be Risuka. But it's just that my father is different, why is the situation so different?”

“Children...”

I glared at Mizukura Haki.

“Children come to this world involuntarily. No matter what kind of father they will meet, they can only accept it in general. This is a condition attached to coming to this world. Children have no right to choose.”

“...These words do not sound like It seems to be from a child, too fatalistic. Let me guess, you apparently have some kind of complex related to your parents right? ,is that why you would rather put your entire trust into Risuka?”

“.....”

“Although it may not exactly be the case. But if this indeed is the situation then, you should dissuade Risuka even more, provided that you are really willing to think for her. I care about Risuka from the bottom of my heart, knowing that it is futile, or I will try to dissuade her, in fact, as long as I use my “Misfortune”, it would be easy to achieve the goal. Even if Risuka is disgusted, I have no choice. I am not going to say I am doing this for Risuka’s sake, I want to take her back to Nagasaki for my own cause.”

“... “

“But... it's truly a beautiful thing, I'll tell you that..”

Mizukura Haki once again said such a thing, as if he was deeply impressed. I can only catch the figure of Mizukura Haki in a blur. That's how far my consciousness has wavered.. A man in a school uniform – a man with red hair and narrow eyes, with bandages wrapped around his hands.

“I take back most of the curses I said to you, then. I take back most of the expletives I've said about you,” he said. “Kugi Kizutaka, you truly have seen the worst of magic. You truly have known magic long enough to know the worst of it.”

“.....”

I – I let such words of Mizukura Haki slip through my mind in a daze. This feeling is very familiar. I remember that when I “omitting” time with Risuka, the time gap before regaining consciousness was the same hazy. What is this place? Who am I? For Kugi Kizutaka, I cannot forget, this is my pride. As for this place-by the river-under the iron bridge. I was sitting on the cement block with my back leaning against the rough pier, exhausting all my strength-breathing. The wet clothes stick to the body, which is quite uncomfortable. This uncomfortable feeling dominates the whole body, and I

can't feel the slightest pain. The hat on my head was no longer there, I have no idea where it went, it was probably washed away by the river! Not a problem, it was not mine anyway. The schoolbag that was originally on my back is now thrown at my feet.Well, I finally grasp the current situation. But-

"But the outcome has been determined, I win."

"..."

The strategy of jumping down from the iron bridge was very correct. At least it washed away the blood of the Mizukura Haki and got rid of the magical entanglement. Now I am no longer troubled by "misfortune". But the "misfortune" coming to the surprise is unbearable no, it should be the fatal last blow. It is like a curse. The sight of me who jumped off the iron bridge was just obscured by the concrete piers. As a result, I couldn't see the huge behemoths falling down the river from the upper reaches of the wooden blocks that can only be described as huge. Under the influence of gravity and acceleration, I slammed into the "driftwood" that appeared suddenly. This piece of "driftwood" is full of branches and leaves. The verb should be changed from "to hit" to "to pierce". As a result, I was able to wash away the blood of Mizukura Hakki, but - now I was dyed all red by the color of my own blood. In the end, there was a tremendous amount of excitement: I don't know how I managed to get to land, but I don't know if I've ever been able to get to but I'm really - it's a wonder I'm still alive and my body is tattered. I'm not going to be able to say that I'm not going to be able to do anything about it. You can't help but laugh. But the pain paralyzed me, and I couldn't even do that.

"...Isn't it irrelevant to the outcome?"

"Is it? Well, I did say that this was a "test" for you. Kugi Kizutaka-kun, if this really was a "test", then you would have passed with flying colors! Although it's a pity that this was not a "test" at all, but rather an "experiment". And the results of the "experiment" all point to the fact that you have failed. Geniuses are just as unlikeable as idiots, and the only way to survive is to deliberately not score 100 points. Kizutaka, this has been my current law of survival." Mizukura Haki said, taking out the pistol from his uniform indifferently. I haven't studied guns and can't see what model is, but based on common sense, it should be a pistol made in Nagasaki. I heard that it's easy to get firearms in that area... And then—Mizukura Hakki, while checking the bullet, repeats it again, as if to include it. "I want to take Risuka back to Nagasaki."

"..."

“If it wasn’t necessary, I wouldn’t have shown this guy in front of you, Chamberlain or even Risuka. If possible, I try my best to hide it in my chest forever. But the situation is already very urgent, Kizutaka. Now that you and Risuka have already met quite a bit, I should not hesitate to see the situation in front of you. I believe you also know very well that Risuka is a rare genius of the century. No matter how unwilling I am, I have to admit that. Although she is a child who is not well versed in the world, she cannot erase the fact that she is a genius magician. Her existence makes me feel ashamed. However, there is still Risuka who is a genius in this world who is unable to change. Facts. Kugi Kizutaka, you said that you defeated the Kagetani Hebiyuki ten days ago that is, the “Kingdom of Shadows,” right?”

Before I could answer, Mizukura Haki said to himself.

“Ever since that day—”

Mizukura Haki’s narrow eyes sharpened even more.

“Six magicians have crossed through the “Gate”.”

“...Six...magicians?”

“Yes, six. Not one, not two, not three, not four, not five, not seven, not eight, not nine, but six magicians. I’m not sure I need to be told by Chamberlin that Risuka is planning "something" behind my back, but in fact I noticed it a long time ago – of course I also knew that Risuka was extremely concerned about the missing Shingo-san. Didn't I explain to you earlier about Risuka's high level of servitude? But for me, this is really nothing to worry about, and all the worries are absolutely unnecessary. After all, with Risuka’s ability to “manipulate time”, it is impossible to find Shingo-san who possesses the “invisibility” ability that even interferes with the highest level of the fate system for predicting the future and going back to the past.”

“ ... ”

“But there are six magicians.”

Mizukura’s expression was adorned with scorn and contempt.

“The “Eyeball Club” Hitokai Muen.”

The first person –

““Carousel” Chikyuugi Mizore.”

The second person –

““Muddy Soles ” Haemura Shouka.”

The third person-

““Buried White Darkness” Tou Kiria.”

The fourth person-

““Even-numbered Mansion” Yuishima Ehime.”

The fifth person-

“Finally is Mizukura Kagi, who does not currently have any title. There are a total of six magicians. These six people crossed almost at the same time.” The Gate. The Nagasaki people who have crossed the Gate of the city are rare. This is definitely not an accidental coincidence. Moreover, it was picked on the conflict between Risuka and the Kagetani Hebiyuki, and contact with Mizukura Shingo, albeit only by voice.. You, the brightest man in the room, can understand what this is all about, can't you? Kugi Kizutaka?”

“ ... ”

“It means that the time is nigh, and none left to spare for hesitation.”

Mizukura Haki walked in front of me.

“I treat you as an equal person and make a formal request. Yes, this is not a negotiation, but a request. I no longer treat you as a child. This is a formal request made by Mizukura Haki to Kugi Kizutaka, please help me persuade Risuka to return to Nagasaki! Since you can capture her heart, this shouldn't be a problem for you, right? The reason Risuka can contact Shingo-san within two years, was all because of you acting behind the scenes. Yes, you are the biggest hero, I understand this very well. So-please, it is not too late, as long as you are willing to comply, I am willing to offer any exchange terms. Kizutaka Kugi, please assist me in bringing Risuka back to Nagasaki!”

“ ... ”

“Come again?”

“...--o good.”

“...I can't hear you .”

"That's no good" I said with proper clarity this time. "I absolutely won't give Risuka to someone like you."

"..."

"Risuka is mine. Don't even dare of snatching her away with me." I declared Mizukura Haki. "Just because you want to be on an equal footing with me, less dreaming. No matter what exchange terms you offer, no one can take Risuka away. She is mine."

"...Is this your answer? It's really disappointing, I feel despair from the bottom of my heart. Turns out that you remain a brat until the end."

Disappointed from the bottom of his heart, Mizukura Haki aimed his gun at my head with a displeased face. I can't feel the threatening atmosphere, the scene is full of solemnity. "Since you are a great contributor to Risuka's contact with Shingo-san, as long as you disappear from this world, my goal is also achieved. Kugi Kizutaka-kun, I think you might have misunderstood it? You should be concerned it's not Risuka's advances and retreats? it's your life. don't think I won't really kill you, for me for the sake of my survival value based on Risuka, stepping into my father's footsteps and becoming a crime People, it's not that difficult for me. Fortunately, I have no children and will not fall into the causal cycle of father-child debt repayment."

"..."

"And yet... and yet, you insist that Risuka Mizukura is your property? Even if it's said to be in exchange for your own life.?"

"If you don't hesitate to fight for my life, can you stop your senseless rant about taking Risuka away?" I was provocative. "That has to be the biggest joke I've ever heard. You honestly thought you could trade with me? No matter what delude yourself into thinking, Risuka is mine. She belongs to me. This is an unshakable fact. I will not let others take away my property. . "

"If you were willing to surrender, I could have at least spared your life.

"So what? I'm the master of my own, no need to bow to you. Mizukura Haki scowled at those words. I still couldn't even move my body. "Although you pride yourself in calling yourself her "Big Brother", you still don't know a single thing at all do you. Risuka crossed the city gate to find her father because of her 'servitude.'. That's no way possible."

"..."

“Risuka would not hit others hard for such a reason. She has no shame in hitting me for a firm “will” and a certain “purpose”. If Risuka is really so easy to control, she would have become a “tool” a long time ago; if she was such a magician who was so easy to be seethrough? I would have long been regarded as a “chess piece”. Since she is not affiliated with me, it means she will not be affiliated with other people.”

I have never seen such an opinionated person, even after using all means, I still can't take her for myself. The reason is very simple, Risuka has a firm “will” and a clear “purpose”, these two elements make Risuka unable to become a tool, unable to become a chess piece. She is not that kind of material.

“Mizukura Risuka is not a pawn.”

And with that, I coughed up blood.

“Also, what did you just say? Risuka is a rare genius of the century? That's way too ridiculous, even for a joke. She may be talented but her hard work precedes her talent.”

I - I've been looking at it for the past year and a bit. I know how many grimoires line the shelves in Risu's room. I've been watching her for a long time, so I know. I have been observing Risuka, and of course these small details can't escape my eyes.

“That's why I had to assist her... after witnessing her efforts... I just couldn't help myself from doing this...”

“ ... ”

“Also, you can't kill me. Yes, I really think so, and I also doubt what you want to express through this? You can't kill me. Mizukura Haki absolutely has no ability to kill Kugi Kizutaka!”

“Really? Congratulations then.”

Mizukura Haki didn't seem to have the will to continue negotiations. He bluntly pulled up the trigger, with a cold murderous intent, absolute hostility, and determination to pull the trigger. The train just passed the iron bridge overhead, and the loud noise masked the gunfire. Maybe Mizukura Haki was waiting for this time, right? In other words, he didn't expect my begging for mercy at all. The sound, noise, and concealed gunshots of the train passing by, I still clearly heard bullets piercing the space, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight with the train The bang came one after another.

“...Huh.” Of the

eight bullets, none of them hit my body. Yes, it can't happen. Now I can't move at all, let alone get up and dodge, and the distance between Mizukura's broken record and me is only a few meters away, even the kindergarten kid, not all eight shots will be missed. Of course, the premise is that there are no obstacles between the two.

Risuka was stretching out her hands and standing in front of me.

The tiny body blocks all bullets.

“Hi...Kizutaka.”

“...hello, Risuka.”

“...Did I make you wait?”

“No.”

I shook my head.

“ You came right on time.”

“Really? That's good.” Risuka seemed to heave a sigh of relief, her footsteps became unstable, and she fell directly on top of me. When I saw something was wrong, I quickly caught her. My hands still couldn't move, so I could only rely on her body to block Risuka's body, and the hat fell into my pool of blood.

“...Impossible!” The moment Risuka fell, Mizukura Haki's panicked expression was really impressive. “Impossible! Impossible! How could Risuka--”

“Surprised? You should know why. This is Risuka's magic, the “omission” of “time”.”

“But... but for the 'omission', you need the 'coordinates'! A solid image of 'I'm there' should be essential! It's just a coincidence, the result of 'misfortune' that we're here! There's no way Risu could know that we're here right now...!”

”I know they are here, but I don't know where they are... right? For all that magic,, you don't have the word "application" in your head”

” ah -!! “

” More than half of my body is made up from Risuka’s body parts, Mizukura Haki ” I struggled to squeeze a triumphant smile. “Wasn’t this what you told me in the first place? Didn’t you tell me? That you feel Risuka’s existence from within me”

“Half...more than...? That’s an exaggeration! That’s seriously messed up....just how”

“Yes, it's almost, so I am the coordinator of Risuka. To be honest, I didn't expect Risuka to smell, but since you all feel it. Of course, Risuka has no reason to be ignorant.”

“Woo—! But, but—! But—! Even so, you, you— Kugi Kizutaka!” Mizukura Haki’s panic was obvious. I saw him throw the pistol on the ground, maybe it was out of bullets! “Even in this situation, do you still believe Risuka will come to rescue? Even if your life is like a candle in the wind, even at the moment when it may go out at any time, you still hold absolute faith in Risuka , like a martyr?”

“No, I don’t have any faith. I'm just a very lonely guy who believes in nothing but his own bad luck. If I had to say, well, I just did what I always do: "I bought 'time' and then the - yes. 'As usual'.”.”

“'As - as usual th-this.....? So, you've never been the first to - no, but that doesn't stop you from doing this thing that you've always done.”

“Yes, there are absolutely no irregularities.” I shifted my gaze from Haki to Risuka. There are many emotions in my heart. “As for now, Mizukura Haki, this is where your misfortune truly begins.”

“...!”

“Let everyone wait a long time, the show is about to come on.” As usual, I said the victory declaration. “Keep your eyes open, big brother.”

Risuka’s petite body was flushed red and gradually began to dissolve. The viscous and strong bright red liquid formed a sea of blood under my feet, and the eight bullet holes continued to overflow with red blood. The space between me and Mizukura Poji was dyed bright red. Red, red, red, red, dazzling bright red. Facing this scene, Mizukura Haki just stood still, unable to give out any proper response, he did not take any action. He had no intention of running away, he gave it all up entirely , and just chose to stand on the spot and watch the development of the matter. a wise decision. Now

that he has reached this point, the only thing he can do now is to watch the development of things so as to take this opportunity to open his eyes.

“...Risuka.” Consciousness became blurred again. As far as the amount of bleeding is concerned, I am definitely not inferior to Risuka. “Next... I’ll leave it to you.”

“No, question, question!”

The unstoppable spell began to chant, and the endlessly unfolding sea of blood, the sea of blood mixed with the blood of Risuka and I began to gather around me. . Every drop of blood seems to have it's own will, and in the turbulent sea of blood, the image of “her” gradually appears. The blood continues to gather, leading to the end of destruction.

“Nonkiri, Nonkiri, Magna Ado, Loikis Rokislow, Los Casscaru, Nonkiri, Nonkiri, Makena, Loikis Rokislow, Losca Siskalu, Masak, Masak, Kajklina, Lu, Leochi, Lisona, Loyd, Maid, Kanakoy, Kakakaki, Kakakaki , Namoma, Namonaki, Doikagu, Marus, Marus, Namomei, Namomei — —”

“Nyarula!”

Before I could see “her” body fully unfolding, my consciousness fell to the bottom of the unknown. At the moment before losing consciousness, I felt particularly at ease. Seeing “her” beautiful arms over my vest and picking up the red hat, I suddenly felt that today’s misfortune was worth its price.

★★★

Once I read a short story, about a protagonist who is a high school student who likes to dig holes. Digging is his hobby no, it’s a habit. Back mountains, beaches, campuses, atriums, stadiums, parks, grasslands, beaches, construction sites, dangerous buildings, as long as it is a place where you can dig holes, you will see masterpieces by the high school students. He was always digging holes, digging holes constantly, always carrying a shovel by his side. The high school student’s burrowing behavior is not meaningless. He is afraid-no, sure he will kill sooner or later, so he keeps digging because he needs a grave to bury the body. One day when he was traveling far away and shoveling under the mound by the river, he suddenly felt a little strange. Even so, high school student did not stop the work at hand. Digging a hole is not an end for him, but a means, and it is impossible to give up halfway. Finally, the high school student dug up a body. ...It turns out that he wasn’t the only one, and the high school student felt happy.

“ ... ”

“Oh. Are you awake?”

Accompanying the awakening is a cloudless starry sky. The brilliant starlight and the dark sky formed a contradictory contrast, occupying my vision. “...” It takes a few seconds to adjust from the hazy dream to the vivid reality. I remember that the moment before I lost consciousness, there was still a red sunset on the horizon... It seemed that I had been in a coma for quite a while. At this moment, I suddenly noticed the wonderful touch on the back of my head, raised my head and looked up, and found Risuka was smiling at me—a shy smile. It seems that am lying on Mizukura Risuka’s lap. The location is on the grass some distance from the bridge piers, and the gurgling river sounds particularly annoying.

“Hello.”

“...Hmm.” i tried to get up, but there was a slight pain in my back. Although the twenty-seven-year-old “RISUKA” healed my wound, the “pain” was deeply drawn in my consciousness, and it was hard to erase it for a while. In fact, this level of pain has long been routine, and it will not affect my mobility; it’s just well, forget it. It's very comfortable to rest on Risuka's lap, and I don't bother to move my body anymore, now I just feel so tired and tired...

“...What about Mizukura Haki?”

“Hmm...” Risuka Meditate for a moment. “Onii-chan just returned to Nagasaki.”

“...Hmm.”

It seemed that he finally gave up his thoughts and returned to Nagasaki without Risuka. I don't know what agreement the 27-year-old “RISUKA” reached with Mizukura in the limited “one minute” period, but they are relatives who grew up together, so it should not be easy to enter combat mode. .

“By the way, it was a really close call.”

“It’s okay, I’m used to it.”

“If Chamberlin hadn't told me about the truck accident, I never would have known..”

“You mean that. Ah? Hmm...Actually, I expected you to pay attention...”

TV news should have reported the truck accident, and any “incident” or “accident” that occurred in Kyushu will not escape Risuka’s search network. Mizukura Haki’s “Misfortune” will not affect the coffee shop far away, and he also expected that I would not call Risuka for help, who had high self-esteem. Although all this was expected, that guy was indeed quite smart.

“Onii-chan ask me to send a message to you.”

” Sent a message...? What was it?!”

“ *“By the next time we meet, I hope you will be a dignified man”* “

“...boring.”

“Also, *“I hope grow taller.”* ”

“Tell him, *“You don’t need to worry about my business”.*”

“Okay. I will tell him over the telephone.”

“I retract my earlier, you don’t have to tell him.”

Risuka laughed, probably thinking |I was kidding! This is a good thing for me, so I don’t want to continue the same topic.

“...I didn't mind the coincidence so much, but... I'm afraid I'm going to hate it..”

“Kizutaka.”

“Huh?”

“I shouldn’t have scolded you, sorry.” Risuka’s tone sounded really sorry. “Even if you deceived me, it is undeniable that you helped me a lot. So... I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologise for something so trivial.”

“But—”

“I scolded you so badly, it wont’ be solved just by apologising.”

“ ... ”

"So the one who should apologize is me." I deliberately avoided Risuka's scorching gaze and looked far away at the stars in the sky. "I'm sorry as well, I shouldn't have deceived you."

"..."

"Forgive me...uhh...please forgive me."

"...Kizutaka."

"We haven't even gotten to the end of it yet. The purpose of my purpose and Riska's purpose has not been achieved at all. You can't go back to Nagasaki by going back to this halfway house. You can't go back."

"...Kizutaka." After a moment of silence, Risuka spoke again. "Why do you need me?"

"I need your magic." I answered simply. "Because you were the first magician I met."

"But my magic is useless at all, so far it's almost useless. I'm sure you've heard the same thing before, Kizutaka. You could have switched to a different wizard at some point."

"They were all good at it. Both wizards and magic users. However, you are still better than them all.."

"But there must be someone better than me. Could it be because I am the daughter of Mizukura Shingo?"

"This is also one of the reasons."

I nodded and answered Risuka's question directly.

"But...actually...I—" Yes, I have always treated girls like Mizukura Risuka or Ariga Orié—"Really, I have a very good impression of people with clear goals. I also like people who work tirelessly to achieve their goals. Every time I see this kind of person, I have an idea of wanting to lend a helping hand. People who continue to work towards their goals have irreplaceable value, and I just want to help these kinds of people realize their dreams."

"...really?"

Risuka smiled and nodded, seeming to have a feeling for what I said. If it wasn't for Risuka's lap, I'm afraid it would be difficult for me to say such a thing, right? It seems that I have to thank the Mizukura Haki that hurt me.

But again, after struggling for a long time, I finally bravely said these words from the bottom of my heart today. This should be considered a great fortune in misfortune? Anyway, now it's my turn to question Risuka.

“Risuka , what about you?”

“Huh?”

“Why did you accept my invitation? I need your magic, and you can't get anything from me.”

“Um...”

“Answer me.”

“Because I am happy to be with you,” Risuka replied timidly. “And—also because Kizutaka has saved my life.”

“Hmm—”

When I met Risuka - in the beginning. At that time, a certain wizard who was opposed to her killed Risuka Mizukura, the Red Witch of Time. Almost killed. No, I should rather say that she was completely killed. There is no other way to describe it. Far-fetched phrases like "almost" are meaningless. Even I, myself, feel disgusted just remembering it. In fact, it's not a metaphor, but rather, if I hadn't arrived in time at the last minute - Risuka would not be alive today. It's not that this "wizard" was an outstandingly powerful enemy, but - at that time Risuka wasn't yet well versed in the concept "magic hunting" and wasn't used to fighting wizards. And on top of that, at that time, she was overconfident in her own power. She was too overconfident in her trump card, the trump card of the twenty-seven year old "myself", which is the usual trump card. And therefore, the result of that, the result of ignoring my instructions. That's the heartbreak trauma that Risuka Mizukura is carrying, which she can't do anything about at the moment. You can't say that it's a good memory for me, of course, but - I must say, unfortunately, that I too overestimated the power of the 27-year-old RISUKA at that time. I must say that I didn't completely understand how difficult it was to deal with "her" - if I did something to Risuka, as Mizukura Haki says, then that's the only thing I could do, I think. If I had to say something more, it would be this. If there's a point at which Risuka trusted me - if there's a point at which she started to listen to me, that's probably the only place she'll ever be able to do what I say. But that's all I know. But this is not what I want to ask, what I want to ask is not this, because-

“...because this is a reason given after the fact, what I want to know is the reason at the beginning, your original idea. Why did you agree to me in

the first place? Proposal? Maybe I knew the answer at the time, but I forgot now. What did I say to you then...”

I don't know Risuka's thoughts, perhaps because there is no need to know. However, things that are not necessary are still necessary. The place where this kind of affection is used is my weakness.

“Hmm...”

Risuka stretched out her hands and pressed them to my cheeks. The unique touch of the silk gloves made my heart itch. Through the thin gloves, I felt Risuka's body temperature. At first I thought she was going to do what she was going to do, but I couldn't think of her forcibly twisting my neck, abruptly pulling back my gaze looking at the stars, and meeting my own. Risuka's red pupils were staring at me at an unprecedented close distance.

“You gave me this feeling of being needed for the first time.”

“...”

“As for what you said, that's not the point.”

If Mizukura Haki is to be trusted, Risuka is a queer-tempered unsociable lady from Nagasaki, who is not easy to get close to others. I don't know to what extent the unknown whereabouts of my father is related to Risuka's anti-socialization. Basically, I don't think parents should be fully responsible for their children's performance. The relationship between parent and child should not become so difficult to understand.

“Hmm...so...”

Risuka hesitated for a moment before she spoke again.

“For all the sins Kizutaka has committed and the lies he has told, I forgive him, right here and now, for all of them.”

“...”

“Not next time.”

“...OK.”

“Also, please take care of me in the future.”

“That's a bit troublesome.”

“Otherwise I will return to Nagasaki immediately.”

“...Okay!” I reluctantly agreed. “I will try my best to help you in the future.” Risuka nodded in satisfaction. Speaking of the first time, I also experienced this feeling of being forgiven for the first time.

“Kizutaka.” Risuka showed a gorgeous smile—reminiscent of the smile of the 27-year-old “her”.

“Do you need me?”

Through Kagetani Hebiyuki, I had heard the voice of Mizukura Shingo. Although it was only two or three sentences, his voice was engraved in my mind in a clear form, which is unforgettable. It has nothing to do with light and darkness, it has nothing to do with yin and yang, it has nothing to do with black and white, it has nothing to do with life and death, it has nothing to do with good and evil, it has nothing to do with positive and negative, it has nothing to do with reality, it has nothing to do, it has nothing to do with true or false, it has nothing to do with suffering, it has nothing to do with righteous and evil, and it is intertwined and mixed with unidentified sounds. Overwhelming existence, creepy. Mizukura insisted on bringing Risuka back to Nagasaki. I can honestly understand his good intentions. As far as age is concerned, Mizukura Haki is definitely better than Risuka to understand the horror of Mizukura Shingo, so he can't easily dispel his thoughts, this time it is just a temporary troop. Of course, the “twenty-seven-year-old” she did not “defeat” Mizukura Haki, and the reason for forcing him to temporarily suspend troops is probably Risuka's act of blocking the bullet for me. Mizukura Haki broke and didn't want to be an enemy of Risuka. Although we escaped this time, it doesn't mean that he won't make a comeback. Mizukura had to take Risuka back to Nagasaki, because he believed that it was for Risuka's sake, and the “next time” in the message was definitely not a social call. No matter if I grow taller or not, sooner or later he will appear in front of me and Risuka again. Although he didn't want to admit it, Mizukura's record was indeed a very difficult enemy, and the five titles of Kagetani Snake were nothing at all. Although the battle that Risuka was “killed” was also very tricky, and I also understand the horror of magic, it cannot be denied that we were indeed defeated by the mentality of underestimating the enemy. “Habit” is really an invisible killer. Although I have lost more than half of my body now, I am also used to the piercing pain. Perhaps the real enemy is actually this kind of “accustomed” feeling, and the calmness between Risuka and I is the best proof. But even if we know how terrible habit's are, the behavioral patterns of Risuka and I will not change, because we have already stepped in, how can we go back empty-handed, how can we go back? Everything is too late, Risuka and I can no longer look back, and our bloodstained hands make it impossible for us to start again. Never regretting is of course a kind of hypocrisy, but rather than being a hypocritical person, I would rather choose

to be alone. So I have never regretted it, and it is impossible to regret it. The previous sacrifices are not worth returning to the original point and I have no other options. The only option is to follow through towards the established goal. Even so, Risuka is willing to forgive me, her idea is really naive. Even in this situation, she is still willing to lend a helping hand to me, I can only say that she is really too kind. Or does Risuka really believe that I will not deceive her again? What is the basis for this trust? Is she really willing to trust blindly? Am I dependent on me unconditionally? To be honest, I really don't know, I really don't understand Risuka's thoughts. But-forget it, I don't like the feeling of not knowing, I'll learn about her slowly from now on! I am willing to spend a lot of time understanding Risuka's thoughts, as long as she is willing to stay with her forever-as for now, let her go! I don't like sticky things, but to be honest, I still have sweets (note: sticky things allude to love between men and women, and the word for sweets is innocent, meaning innocent Risuka.) I have no resistance. , I have to control how much I eat in the future too.

And thus under the starry skies,

I found my first friend.

From Beyond" is Q.E.D.

